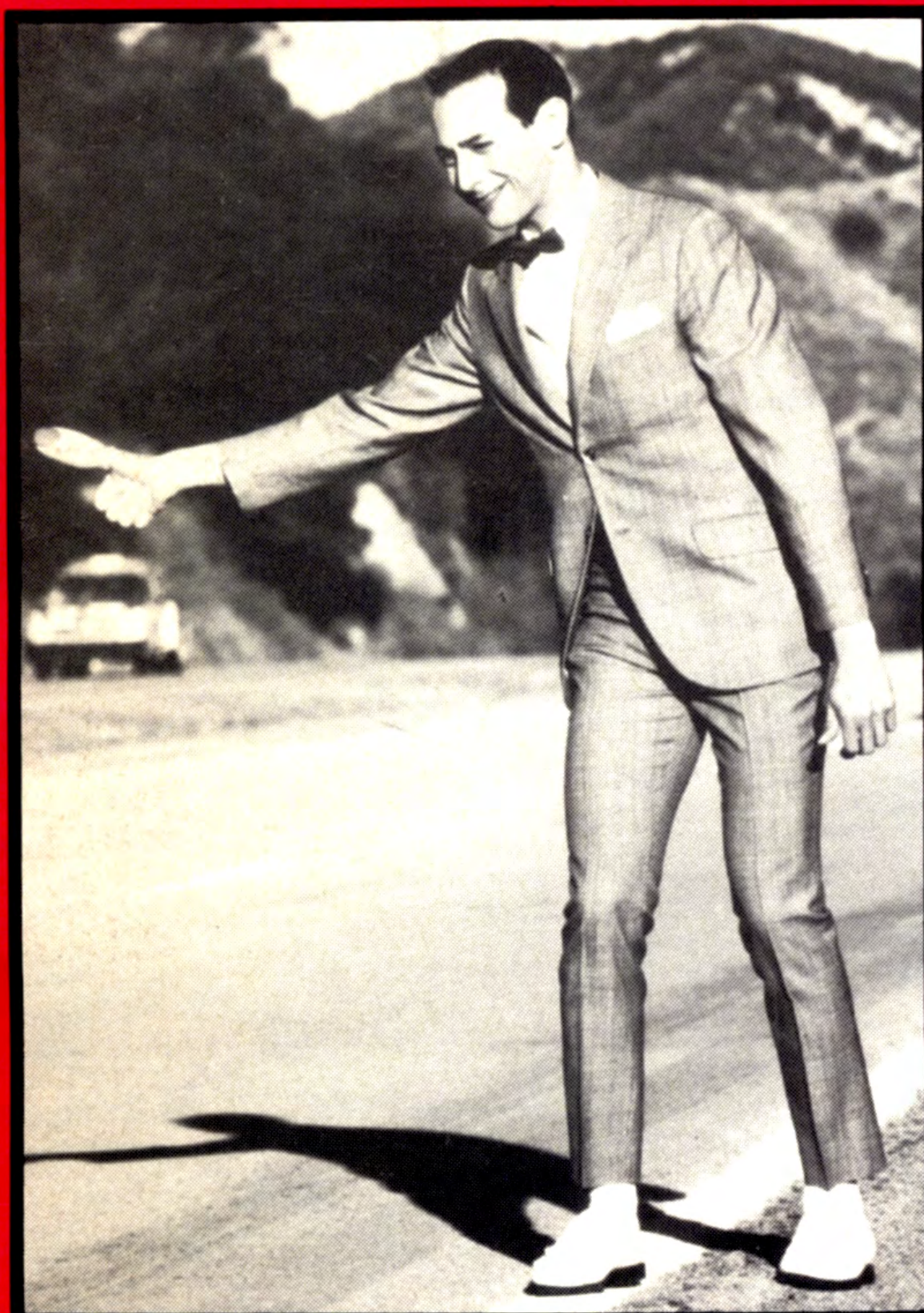


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No. 9  
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C O M E D Y

HOLLYWOOD • ALTERNATIVE • VIDEO



# CineAction!

## No. 9, July 1987

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# Contents

From The Editors BRYAN BRUCE & MAUREEN JUDGE	Page 1
<b>Comedy</b>	
Pee Wee Herman: The Homosexual Subtext BRYAN BRUCE	Page 3
<i>Rally 'Round The Flag, Boys</i> ; or, Give it Back to the Indians ROBIN WOOD	Page 8
Reconsidering <i>The Quiet Man</i> KEN NOLLEY	Page 15
<i>The Falls</i> PAUL DELLA PENNA & JIM SHEDDEN	Page 20
Rosa Von Praunheim in Theory and Practice BRYAN BRUCE	Page 25
Colin Campbell Interviewed KATHLEEN MAITLAND-CARTER	Page 32
The Studio with the Team Spirit: A Look at Ealing Comedies MARC GLASSMAN & JUDY WOLFE	Page 40
Cavell and the Fantasy of Criticism: Shakespearean Comedy and <i>Ball of Fire</i> LELAND POAGUE	Page 47
<b>Neglected Film</b>	
<i>Corrupt/Cop Killer/Order of Death</i> GLORIA BERLIN & BRYAN BRUCE	Page 56
<b>Letters</b>	
Downes, Benson, Wood	Page 62

Front cover: Pee Wee Herman and Jerry Lewis.





# from the editors

The object of this issue on comedy is not necessarily to be funny (something which can eschew criticism), but rather, oxymoronically, to take a serious look at it—or more precisely, to examine how humour functions in different films. Comedy has the potential to make us look and laugh at ourselves, and if it takes a radical position, can eliminate (at least for the moment) strict behavioural codes which limit our perspective on the world.

In this issue of *CineAction!*, many of the articles deal with films in which comedy is a deliberate strategy employed as a means to renegotiate the perceived order of things. An extreme example of this is *The Falls*. Paul Della Penna's and Jim Shedden's article brings to light Peter Greenaway's self-parody of the absurd lengths we go to in the 'ontological search'—eventually giving way



(after three-and-a-half hours of screen time) to a meaningless wasteland. Greenaway's obsessive use of logic here becomes, ironically, not unlike that which it is seemingly in opposition to—the anarchistic impulse found in slapstick comedy. This is an indication of the potential of humour not only to challenge existing conventions, but also to be playful with its own presentation and thereby elude strict definition.

All too often film comedies are dismissed without being given any or very little critical attention. Some of the usual rationales are: 1. they are not 'serious'; 2. it is apparently too difficult to isolate the structural devices and the character traits of the comic which work together to make us laugh; and 3. arguably, analyzing humour spoils it. However, if we are laughing (and there *is* a considerable audience out there for comedy—in the theatres, watching the television, and attending video screenings), then critical attention in this area of film is warranted.

The opening article on Pee Wee Herman is, on one level, an attack on the critical dismissal of a comic artist's work which seemingly cannot be defined. It argues that, in fact, Pee Wee *can* be discussed, that his work *is* accessible to evaluation. The analysis illuminates the homosexual subtext in the comedian's work, placing him in the rebellious position of resisting conventional sexual stereotyping. The article also alludes to the comedian's historical precedent, Jerry Lewis, in his adoption of hysterical antics, an identifiable strategy promoting his 'project.'

A number of the articles, including the analysis of four of Rosa Von Praunheim's films, and the interview with Colin Campbell about his work in video, deal with the problems associated with gender stereotyping. In both Von Praunheim's and Campbell's works, comic strategies are consciously employed as devices to explode or blur the lines of repressive moralities, albeit not always successfully, and sometimes—in Von Praunheim's case—with questionable results.

The aforementioned pieces discuss films which employ conventions or, more generally, a genre, to subvert a repressive ideology. But, as contributors Robin Wood and Kathleen Maitland-Carter point out, comedy, in all its manifestations, can also act as a camouflage for, or support outright, a reactionary ideology. The

conventional use of comedy in film tends to be 'for its own sake' with no conscious agenda in mind, safe narrative closure becoming an essential aspect of the attitude. Several of the Hollywood films discussed here fit into this pattern to a greater or, as in the case of *Rally 'Round The Flag, Boys*, considerably lesser extent. However, as Wood notes, the McCarey film may not use a conscious comic strategy to undermine the American ideals of the 1950s, but the dynamic of the film's comic elements nonetheless works to produce a subversive text.

In addition to the alternative and Hollywood films/videos dealt with in the issue, we have included an article on the Ealing comedies produced in depression-era Britain. And, a discussion of Roberto Faenza's *Corrupt* appears as part of the on-going 'Neglected Film of the '80s' feature in *CineAction!* In contradistinction to looking at a neglected film, the reconsideration of a film that has already garnered critical attention can be somewhat contentious, and often includes a defense of this process. Ken Nolley's "Reconsidering *The Quiet Man*" brings into focus the problematic and, essentially, political ramifications of reworking past critical projects, and the function of criticism in general.

And finally, we have included two letters addressing Robin Wood's article on Leavis (*CineAction!* 8) and his reply. We encourage readers to continue this kind of dialogue.

**Bryan Bruce & Maureen Judge**



# PEE WEE HERMAN:

## The Homosexual Subtext

by Bryan Bruce

**AN EXAMINATION** of contemporary issues of comedy would be incomplete without taking into consideration the meaning behind Pee Wee Herman, a comedian who, amidst the macho posturing of the current male Hollywood stars, has somehow managed to generate a phenomenal mystique around his unique reworking of the classic 98 lb. weakling image. In direct opposition to the despicably hypermasculine bravado of the other comedy superstar of the present era, Eddie Murphy, whose notorious homophobia, rivalling Anita Bryant's, has become an obligatory part of his screen persona (his annoying, mincing fag imitations), Pee Wee champions the milquetoast quarter, providing a hero who's not afraid to cry when his bike gets stolen, and who actually uses his pantywaist status to the utmost advantage, outsmarting any number of lumbering hulks with his wacky, unpredictable, and, most importantly, 'sexually suspect' antics. Pee Wee is the new underdog whose sexual ambivalence both places him squarely in this position, and serves as his greatest strength, his secret, naughty world penetrating the unconscious of a rigid and repressed popular audience that doesn't quite grasp the insurrectionary purposes behind the Pee Wee pose.

I want to concentrate mostly on the sexual significance of the Pee Wee Herman persona, a dimension largely avoided (or altogether missed) by 'serious' critics and pop reviewers alike, and the way he uses comedy as a strategy of rebellion. To this end, Freud's *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, a work, itself, not without a sense of humour, will provide a useful theoretical background for the analysis of Pee Wee.

The failure of critics to come to terms with Pee Wee Herman can be partly attributed to a reluctance to deal with the implications of an implicitly gay icon who is adored by children, and



Pee Wee and Speck: A boy and his dog.

whose appeal cuts across a surprisingly wide range of youth subcultures—punks, skateboard and BMX kids, even the black rap faction, rappers Joeski Love immortalizing him in their "Pee Wee's Dance" record and video. Pee Wee makes parents (and critics) nervous because he is strange, perverse, aberrant—not only an adult who acts, resolutely, like a smart alecky kid, but an androgynous one as well, who wears pancake make-up, rouge, and a hint of lipstick, and talks in a weird falsetto—hardly a role model for the sensible youth of today. Critics shy away from acknowledging the homosexual connotations; a typical response from *Film Comment* suggests that "... if Pee Wee has to have an inordinate number of handsome young men on the show, that's his business. You just have to take *Pee Wee's Playhouse* [his Saturday morning kid's show] at face value."<sup>1</sup> Most accounts of Pee Wee I've read<sup>2</sup> restrict themselves to describing the comedian's crazy behaviour and the décor of his TV show set, or digress into a nostalgia about the writer's own child-

hood, expressing relief that Pee Wee's silliness permits them to forego any ideological analysis. There is also an aspect of resentment at work over not having access to the lexicon that Pee Wee has developed—an aggressive mixture of childspeak and gay references that confounds critical reading—a good measure of the success of Pee Wee's radical project.

It should be made clear that when I speak of Pee Wee Herman's 'gayness,' it's not the actual sexual status of Paul Reubens, the comedian behind the persona, that is, particularly, at issue (or Pee Wee's, either, for that matter), but rather the 'homosexual subtext,' the disguised allusions to a gay sensibility that inform both Pee Wee's television show and his first big screen vehicle, *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*. In the tradition of classical Hollywood, Reubens maintains his star image (as Pee Wee) whenever he is in the public eye (talkshows, interviews, etc.), never allowing the private person to emerge, a 'strategy' that has, itself, become a subject of controversy and promoted much conjecture. It







might be assumed, then, that Reubens (like Rock Hudson, for example) is concealing something (like homosexuality) that might impede his career, or jeopardize his popular acceptance, particularly as the host of a nationally broadcast children's show. This does not, however, prevent the hidden personality, or the significance of its 'repression,' from making itself felt in the constructed persona, the split between the private and the public becoming, in fact, an important aspect of it. Reubens has chosen to have both his own sexuality, and that of his comic creation, remain ambiguous; the proof of a gay point of reference lies in the images he presents us with.

As the reviewer from *Film Comment* nervously points out, Pee Wee does surround himself with attractive men on his show, a fact not necessarily revealing in itself until one realizes that each represents a specific gay male icon, prominent fantasy figures in homosexual pornography (although in the context of the Playhouse, made human and friendly), including the sailor (Captain Carl), the black cowboy (Cowboy Curtis), and the muscular, scantily-clad life-guard (Tito), not to mention the escaped con (Mickey) in *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*. The latter example in particular provides an explicit reference to gay fantasy as Pee Wee, hitch-hiking on a deserted highway, is picked up by the handsome, swarthy Mickey, reckless and ready for anything after a long stretch in the big-house. The two quickly establish a complicity in their contempt for the law before a police roadblock conveniently provides Pee Wee with the opportunity to dress up as Mickey's girlfriend to confound the authorities. This instance of drag, along with his brief appearance as a nun near the end of the film, take Pee Wee's sexual ambivalence to its logical extreme, the nun, in particular, a dead giveaway in its appeal to the irreverent gay camp aesthetic. That the character, in the context of the narrative, is a 'boy' named Pee Wee who uses drag to retrieve his stolen bike, his most precious possession, adds a disturbing twist to the 'conventional' campiness of cross-dressing, presenting it, instead, as another aspect of Pee Wee's rebellion against authority. For those who think the idea of a homosexual subtext in *Pee Wee Herman* is an instance of 'reading into' the material, consider Mickey's lascivious

**OPPOSITE:** In the *Big Adventure*, Pee Wee and Simone enjoy a platonic relationship (above) . . . but Andy, Simone's Bluto-like boyfriend, doesn't see it that way (below).

smile, looking him up and down, as Pee Wee flounces in his "cute little outfit" (as the policeman calls it) long after the roadblock has been passed, or Pee Wee, at the end of the film, giving Mickey, behind bars once more, a hotdog, saying "one footlong," and winking coyly. Sure, there's a file in it, but the double entendre is unmistakable.

The camp sensibility extends beyond these small but significant instances of drag, encompassing, also, Pee Wee's love of the world of retro objects and extraneous gizmos (which fill his Playhouse and his home in the *Big Adventure*) and the Pee Wee persona itself. Camp, according to Susan Sontag, relies on the extravagant, the exaggerated, and the theatrical, all of which apply to Pee Wee and his playthings, and on a certain innocence, such that it "... discloses innocence, but also, when it can, corrupts it."<sup>3</sup> This quality is essential to Pee Wee, behind whose naivety and ingenuousness always lurks a naughty understanding of his own seditious behaviour. Sontag also points to androgyny and a lack of character development as standard earmarks of the camp icon, both of which apply to Pee Wee, and to the predominantly gay impetus behind camp in general, a tradition from which Pee Wee/Reubens borrows strongly. And, of course, one can't overlook Jambi, the fey genie-in-a-box on the *Playhouse*, who camps it up for kids to an alarming extreme. So although Pee Wee transcends the apolitical restrictions of camp, which I'll get to shortly, his affinity with the sensibility is an important dimension of the gay subtext.

Pee Wee's problematic relationship with 'girls' in the *Big Adventure* presents another gay reference, his identification with the boy or teen role becoming probably his most outrageous and disquieting characteristic. In one of his *Playhouse* episodes, upon receiving a present from his many friends, Pee Wee blurts out "I'm the luckiest boy in the whole world." It's shocking to hear not merely a fully grown man, but an epine dandy, refer to himself as a boy; one can imagine parents' eyebrows raising all across the country. In his movie, Pee Wee is confronted with the necessity, according to cinematic convention, of having a love interest, forcing him into the position of dealing with the reality of girls, more specifically Dottie, the one who works at Chuck's Bike-orama. Here his boy pose dictates the classic behaviour of male adolescents who dislike girls interested in romance; but consistent with the double-edged meaning of his persona, Pee Wee's lack

of interest in this area also signifies something 'different.' When Dottie tries to get Pee Wee to take her to the drive-in, he announces "I like you, Dottie," then yells "*Like*," emphasizing his preference for a platonic relationship. Next he tells her "There's a lot of things you don't know about me. Things you wouldn't understand. Things you couldn't understand," then, adding cryptically, "Things you *shouldn't* understand." The reference is obvious, something which, like much of Pee Wee Herman, is lost on kids, but can't be avoided by adults. Finally, Pee Wee gets out of the proposed date by parodying his own rebellious stance: "You don't want to get mixed up with a guy like me. I'm a loner, Dottie, a rebel." That these exact words are used later on by Mickey, the escaped con, to dump Pee Wee, and delivered by James Brolin, playing Pee Wee Herman to Morgan Fairchild's Dottie, in the final film within a film based on Pee Wee's adventure, suggests how absurd the idea of Pee Wee Herman conforming to conventional notions of romantic, heterosexual love really is. His relationship in the film with Dottie, and with Simone, the sexy French waitress, remains one strictly between good friends, and is not, incidentally, characterized by the misogyny one might expect from a camp figure.

Some other indications of a homosexual significance to Pee Wee take the form of classic gay 'jokes' or stereotypes. For example, in *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, the hero steps on a scale which points, automatically, to the 98 lb. mark, a sure sign of the 'sissy.' Then there's Pee Wee's sarcastic mincing which causes him to knock over the row of motorcycles, putting him in hot water with the bike gang. Or on an episode of the *Playhouse*, Pee Wee cuts in on a couple on the dance floor and starts dancing with the man before laughing it off and setting things straight by turning to the woman. It's significant that in most of these instances of humour based on a kind of sexual transgression, Pee Wee places himself in the self-acknowledged 'rebel' position, as the bratty kid who refuses to play by the rules of adult conduct. The connection, for kids, is profound.

Of course Pee Wee couldn't get away with any of this if it wasn't all in the name of comedy. In *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud discusses how humour "... makes use of a means of connection which is rejected by, and carefully avoided in serious thinking,"<sup>4</sup> exactly the dynamic that gives Pee Wee the room to be so abnormal. As the



grown man in a suit and bow tie who acts childish, even, at times, infantile, Pee Wee eludes reason, returning us to a state of mind where anything goes. Freud describes how play is stopped by the advent of reason, so that the only access to such release in adulthood is through humour; the purpose of jokes, then, is "... to remove inhibitions and thereby, render productive those pleasure-sources which have become inaccessible."<sup>5</sup> Pee Wee is all about this kind of 'regression,' encouraging a living out of fantasies, impulsive behaviour, and the pleasure of pure nonsense which stimulates us through confusion.<sup>6</sup> This freedom from logic and "alleviation from the pressure of reason"<sup>7</sup> induced by Pee Wee's playworld (which will soon become, from all reports, an actual geographical site, like Disney's, such is the popularity of Pee Wee), a state in which contradictions can be easily accommodated, may also explain the acceptance of his 'sexual difference,' situated, as it is, before the constraints of a repressed, adult sexual identity.

Freud also points to a more 'sinister' side of the comic impulse coming out of this uninhibited play state, a manifestation of humour "in the service of hostile aggression."<sup>8</sup> There is definitely an edge to Pee Wee, as when, in both TV show and movie, he wraps scotch tape around his face in front of a mirror, then rips it off, watching his own startled expression of pain, delighted by the sensation and his naughtiness. What are parents to make of this kind of onanistic, masochistic act performed in the privacy of the bathroom? The secret word of the *Playhouse*, which children must greet with screaming and yelling at its mention all day long (Pee Wee enlisting children in his schemes for far more than the 30 minutes of air time) serves a similarly antagonistic purpose, promoting a rebellion against authority which Freud describes as another function of humour.<sup>9</sup> This strategy of comedy, then, aggressively confounding reason and seriousness, combined with the playful elusiveness of camp and the sexual ambiguity it entails, constitutes a veiled attack on the conventional values kids are supposed to assume: Pee Wee attempts to intervene before the big package is bought. As in "Penny," the animated short seen on each *Playhouse* episode, the message is, unequivocally, kids have rights too.

There is one more gap in the critical appraisal of Pee Wee Herman that I want to address: little, if anything, has been made of the obvious affinities between Pee Wee and Jerry Lewis, a

connection that puts the comedian in a more meaningful context. To begin with, Lewis, like Herman, appealed to children as much as adults, his sublimely silly and juvenile character even picked up by the comics. Lewis' ape-like caricature as a comic book hero presented a more masculine, sexualized figure than Pee Wee, but both have the same quality of a grown-up masquerading as a kid, adopting similarly irritating voices and crazy, spastic dances. Both personas also tend to undercut masculinity, Pee Wee by feminizing it, Lewis by parodying the he-man role, particularly in *The Nutty Professor* as the intellectual wimp who makes a Jekyll and Hyde transformation into the virile crooner, Buddy Love (a travesty of the swaggering, lady-killer persona of Lewis' former partner, Dean Martin), and in *The Ladies' Man*, as Herbert, playing a shy, innocent houseboy in a thinly disguised bordello. Both also use drag to this end, Lewis, for example, playing his own female back-up trio in *The Patsy*.

Pee Wee consciously plays on his identification with Jerry Lewis, to the extent that *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* is designed very much as a Lewis vehicle of the '60s. Like the self-directed Lewis films, the *Big Adventure* (although not directed, and only co-written, by Paul Reubens) is composed of a series of loosely connected and uneven gags, some working, some misfiring, providing the hero with scenarios in which he can adopt various disguises. The other most obvious quality shared by the films is that both are full of self-conscious filmic references, their own star images wackily breaking out of the diegesis for shock value. In *The Bellboy*, Jerry Lewis plays himself as a big star arriving at the hotel where, within the context of the 'plot,' he is employed as a bellboy. To complicate things, Milton Berle, in a cameo, plays himself as another star registered at the same hotel, as well as another bellboy. In the *Big Adventure*, Pee Wee pays homage to this exact joke, playing a bellboy himself in the film within a film which stars James Brolin as Pee Wee, the film proper also featuring a cameo by Milton Berle. The end of Lewis' *The Patsy* provides a similar reference point, in which Lewis as Stanley Belt, the failed "King of Comedy" (as he is referred to in the film), steps out of character to undermine the traditional cinematic union of the couple. After falling out the window that he is backed up to by his love interest, Ellen/Ina Balin, Stanley/Lewis pops up to reveal the entire set as merely

a Hollywood sound stage, saying, "I can't die. I have to make more movies," and asking "Miss Balin" to join him for lunch. It's the same kind of send-up of filmic convention that Pee Wee Herman appropriates for his first starring vehicle, spoofing the romantic coupling of himself and Dottie by having them embodied by two somewhat sleazy TV personalities in the final drive-in movie within a movie.

This tentative comparison of the two comedians is meant to indicate that Pee Wee Herman is very aware of his comic project, engaging the same kind of techniques and strategies that Jerry Lewis pioneered in the '60s. *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* is certainly nowhere as complex and accomplished as any of the Lewis films of that period; it remains to be seen whether Pee Wee/Reubens, with future films (the next to be set at the circus) will produce works as exciting and brilliant as *The Nutty Professor*, *The Ladies' Man*, and *The Patsy*. He has already asserted a different kind of genius with *Pee Wee's Playhouse*.

The most exciting aspect of Pee Wee Herman, so far, remains his role as vindicator of the sissies, the reluctant hero who outsmarts bullies and worms his way out of impossible situations. In the *Big Adventure*, the weird ritual of his 'Tequila dance,' performed in vintage camp '70s platform shoes, so impresses the surly bikers that they make him an honorary member of their gang. And in his most heroic act, the rescue of all the animals in the pet shop fire, he even saves the snakes that boys are supposed to like, but which Pee Wee finds loathsome and disgusting. That's exactly the kind of hero we need to see more of. □

## NOTES

1. Jack Barth, "Pee Wee TV," *Film Comment*, vol. 22, no. 6, Nov.-Dec. 1986, p. 79.
2. *Rolling Stone*, *Graffiti*, *Impulse*, etc.
3. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Against Interpretation*, New York, Delta, 1981, p. 283.
4. Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, from *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Dr. A.A. Brill, New York, Random House, Inc., 1966, p. 713.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 721.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 727.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 719.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 698.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 699.

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**OPPOSITE:** Jerry Lewis does the Pee Wee.







# Rally 'Round The Flag, Boys; or, Give it Back to the Indians

by Robln Wood

A THEORY OF HOLLYWOOD COMEDY MUST be placed within a broader theory of 'entertainment' and its function within capitalist culture; that function, in turn, must be understood in terms of contradiction. On one level, 'entertainment' is capitalism's means of keeping its victims (and we are all its victims) happy and contented. Or, more accurately, of helping them to maintain the *pretence* that they are happy and contented, as part of the capitalist social contract: submit to domination/exploitation and we'll give you everything you want—'everything you want' being everything we condition you to want (and no more). This capitalistically conditioned 'everything you want' was brutally summed up a very long time ago by a friend of mine as 'Make us laugh or show us your tits.' (The formula, which might be found particularly felicitous in relation to most of the current crop of teenage sex comedies, predated the work of Laura Mulvey by several years but interestingly assumes that the spectator constructed by Hollywood movies is male.) The implied mindlessness of the 'entertainment' is not of course from this point of view as mindless as all that: it covers the incessant reproduction and reinforcement of 'the dominant ideology.'

The contradictory way of looking at it is to suggest a partial analogy (I am aware that it can't be pressed too far) between entertainment and dreams. According to Freud, dreams express unconscious desires—desires so socially unacceptable that our conscious minds cannot accept that we do indeed wish them. When we fall asleep the censor that stands guard over our unconscious dozes off too, and these shameful wishes, after donning disguises that make them very difficult to recognize, can slip by him (the censor, representing the 'Law of the Father,' is emphatically male). The notion of 'entertainment' (by definition, something that is not to be taken seriously) functions as a kind of sleep, and the 'censor' is lulled: 'censor' here being understood in a multiple sense—the external censor (eg. the Hays Office code), the pre-censor (in the form of producers and studio heads), the internal censor within the film-maker. It is important to stress this last point: Hawks and McCarey, for example, habitually discussed their films on the level of plot, action, characters (the 'entertainment' level) rather than on the level of thematic or ideological content, and there is no reason to suspect them of disingenuousness or duplicity. It is

unlikely that, in making *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys*, McCarey was aware that he was expressing a wish that America (not merely as a nation, but its social structures, values and ideology) had never existed; if he had allowed himself to become aware of it he might well have been unable to continue with the film. He saw himself as making a comedy about 'people,' and followed his 'instinct' for what he found (and hoped his audiences would find) funny.

Clearly, these two levels of entertainment coexist, in a state of permanent and often fruitful tension, sometimes one dominating, sometimes the other, the question of which depending on a number of factors of which the most decisive are probably the individual film-maker, the genre, and the period in which the work is produced, the three continuously interacting and mutually affecting each other. The conflict between the two levels can easily be read as a microcosm of the conflict within our culture at large: the forces of oppression/repression vs. the drive towards liberation (the analogy with dreams is again suggestive here), the dominant ideology threatened by the return of all that it must strive to repress in order to maintain itself. It may be objected that such a reading of popular cinema (and of culture generally) is anti-aesthetic (aesthetics being outside or above politics) in that it privileges the subversive work above the conformist, the radical over the conservative. Precisely. If one is prepared to 'live historically' (in the sense so splendidly and cogently defined by Godard/Gorin in *Tout Va Bien*) one will inevitably find a correlation between a work's value and its realized radicalism (one is not speaking here of 'messages' or rhetorical assertions). Conservatism can hardly, by definition, 'lead the sympathetic consciousness into new places': living in the world as we have it today, to believe in the Leavisian (or Lawrentian) 'life' is to be committed to radical social change. The conservative position today is barely able to maintain even the outward semblance of respectability. In the cinema it invariably manifests itself (and gives itself away) as cynicism, whether it be the conscious cynicism of *Blue Velvet* or the unconscious cynicism of *E.T.* The explicit or implicit admission (respectively, in the two films cited) is that it is impossible to believe in what is nevertheless being affirmed.

Obviously, comedy occupies (at least potentially) a privileged position within this concept of entertainment (I have argued elsewhere that the horror film—prior, that is, to its co-option into '80s reactionary revisionism—does also): it is a truism that one of the possible functions of jokes is to say



what one means in a way that suggests that one doesn't really mean it, thereby avoiding offence. Here we have, of course, entertainment's 'Catch 22': one can make the most radically disruptive statements provided one makes them in a form that ensures that no one (including perhaps oneself) takes them seriously. I have frequently been told by students that my defence of this or that Hollywood film is invalid because no one perceived it in that way at the time (or, for that matter, outside the privileged arena of university film courses, *now*). The standard answer (which doesn't satisfy me) is, Yes, but one doesn't know what went on in the spectators' unconscious. (Indeed one doesn't, but since *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys* did not immediately precipitate another American revolution one can conjecture that whatever it was it didn't, effectively, amount to much.) I would rather argue that how people read the film in 1958 is really, now, an 'academic' question, and that the question we should be asking is, What use can we make of the film, here and now?

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**T**HIS ARTICLE WAS ORIGINALLY CONCEIVED as a companion-piece to the one on *Drums Along the Mohawk* published in *CineAction!* 8—the two were intended to appear side by side. *Rally* is to *Drums* the ideal complement and contradiction: one of the greatest westerns answered by one of the greatest Hollywood comedies (both equally in need of revaluation, since neither has been highly regarded even by Ford's and McCarey's admirers). I have followed tradition by classifying *Drums* as a western (on the grounds of thematic content: settlers vs. Indians), but it clearly isn't, in the geographical sense: the Mohawk valley is in New York State, which is also the location of *Rally*'s small-town-cum-garden-suburb. It is not far-fetched to suggest that the log cabin of *Drums* becomes inevitably (given the developing social structures—capitalism, private ownership, home, family, monogamy, the division of labour, cultural concepts of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'—that it epitomizes) the suburban home of *Rally*, a century-and-a-half later. Both are emblems of white settling/imperialism, the Putnam's Landing of *Rally* being associated explicitly with the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers. Ford's celebration, in 1939, of the founding of America is answered, almost two decades later, by McCarey's symbolic wish-fulfilment of its un-founding.

Of course, my collocation of these two films is in a sense quite arbitrary: I know of no factual connection between them, have no reason to assume that McCarey had even seen Ford's film, still less that, if he had, he would have wanted to 'answer' it. The arbitrariness evaporates, however, as soon as we move outside narrowly auteurist concerns to the wider ideological structures within which auteurs are situated. The two films have their places in a trajectory of movies that are explicitly concerned with images of America, a trajectory that runs from *Birth of a Nation* to *Heaven's Gate* and which belongs to the culture (in all its manifold contradictions), transcending the individuals who produced its landmarks. Yet, if *Rally* belongs to America, it also belongs to McCarey and would not have existed (at least in the form in which we have it) without him (I have never believed in the 'death of the author'). Some account of McCarey is therefore relevant here, as partial context in which to situate the film.

McCarey, especially in his later period (to which *Rally* belongs) has been frequently (mis-)construed as a right-wing film-maker, on the grounds of (a) his commitment to Catholicism (*Going My Way*, *The Bells of St. Mary's*) and (b) his notorious anti-Communist Cold War movie *My Son John* (so

notorious that I have never had the chance to see it—it seems to have been swept under the carpet as a potential embarrassment to us all). In fact, he is one of those apolitical directors whose apoliticism enables him to open his work to many contradictory impulses, and offers itself for appropriation by numerous ideological positions. (I use the term 'apolitical' here to signify that his work does not conform, overall, to any specific, fixed political position, not to mean that it is devoid of political significance—in any case an impossibility). It is futile to characterize (let alone denounce) an *oeuvre* like McCarey's from a narrowly ideological viewpoint (right, left, conservative, liberal, radical, whatever): it represents, as 'entertainment,' a rich intervention in the ideological status quo, creating trouble, disturbance, contradiction.

Most of his films fall within the 'umbrella' genre of comedy, but they range across its entire spectrum: 'slapstick' (the work with Laurel and Hardy), 'surrealist' (*Duck Soup*), 'screwball' (*The Awful Truth*), 'romantic' (*Love Affair*), 'sentimental' (*The Bells of St. Mary's*). My terms of classification are to a degree a matter of convention and potentially misleading: they are certainly not meant to be evaluative. The fact that, according to current fashion, 'screwball' is in and 'sentimental' definitely out, does not coerce me into accepting *The Awful Truth* and rejecting *The Bells of St. Mary's*: I find them equally fascinating and inexhaustible. Besides, in McCarey the various sub-genres are never entirely discrete, their conventions interacting with and cross-fertilizing each other. But if one aspect of his multifarious output deserves to be privileged, it is perhaps his work with Laurel and Hardy through the '20s. He was 'supervisor' of all their shorts up to 1930; he directed three of them, and is credited with the 'story' of more than twenty. In short, he was associated in various capacities with the great majority of their finest films (does it still need arguing that their shorts during the McCarey period constitute a body of work comparable to that of Keaton and Chaplin?), and he may well deserve credit for

**Rally 'Round The Flag, Boys:** Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward.





being a decisive influence on it. I think the reverse may be equally valid: that the collaboration with Laurel and Hardy was a decisive influence on McCarey. Their compatibility, at any rate, is plain: if their respective thematics are not identical, the degree of overlap is striking. The Laurel and Hardy thematic (or a major component of it) might be described as follows: a conscious desire to conform to the norms, manners and mores of bourgeois society is continuously undermined by a subconscious or intuitive resistance, expressing itself in accidents, mistakes, misunderstandings, and at times erupting into overt outbursts of destruction. Similarly, much of McCarey's work is structured on the tension between conformism and anarchism, the anarchic impulse always being (explicitly or implicitly) the more highly valued: the step from (say) *Helpmates* (Laurel and Hardy, 1931—outside their McCarey period) to *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys* is not a large one, when one considers the attitude to domesticity. Even McCarey's most seemingly innocuous or reactionary projects reveal themselves, in the execution, to be riddled with resistance in every form: this is supremely the case with *The Bells of St. Mary's*, and may be the case with *My Son John*, to judge from accounts of that film.

The anarchic impulse in McCarey seems intimately bound up with—or expresses itself through—his work with actors, clearly the core of his art (even more so than in the case of his admirer Jean Renoir, whose films suggest a much stronger thematic consciousness). One might draw a parallel between the disruption of social norms and the disruption of the written screenplay, by improvisatory spontaneity. One lesson McCarey took from his work with Laurel and Hardy was surely that, given two gifted comedians performing an inspired routine, you don't distract the audience with fancy camerawork and editing. McCarey's habit is consistently to subordinate his camera to his actors, and if he departs at all from the standard shooting/editing practices of classical Hollywood it is in his predilection for the long, often completely static, take (frequently a two-shot) in which the camera is simply set down in front of the actors to record their performance without interruption or intervention. We know that McCarey improvised a lot (or encouraged his actors to); many of his finest scenes look like improvisations (in the sense of departure from the written text worked out on the set—I don't mean they weren't meticulously rehearsed), and they often 'take over' the film as its most memorable moments, deflecting interest from its official subject, undermining the subject's primacy, at times constructing a new subject: the scene of the Christmas play rehearsal in *The Bells of St. Mary's* is a particularly fine example.

Before discussing *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys* in more detail, I want to raise what still seems to me a central issue in McCarey: his attitude to couples (positive) and to families (generally negative), and the tension arising from that apparent paradox ('apparent,' because it is paradoxical only within the terms of our own social organization). The correctness of my belief that McCarey's work shows a marked and fairly consistent hostility to the family (as we have it) has been hotly contested by Leland Poague (*The Hollywood Professionals, Volume 7*), but in terms that curiously undercut his disagreement: "Wood is clearly . . . wrong in this. Families are terribly important to McCarey, and important for embodying the most basic McCarey issue in its most elemental and agonizing form: if the original McCarey sin is mindless over-conventionality, then families are problematic for encouraging just that sort of behaviour . . ." Precisely. He continues: "And yet, at the same time, McCarey realizes and acknowledges the necessity for families: they are basic to the continuation of life and society. Were there no families there

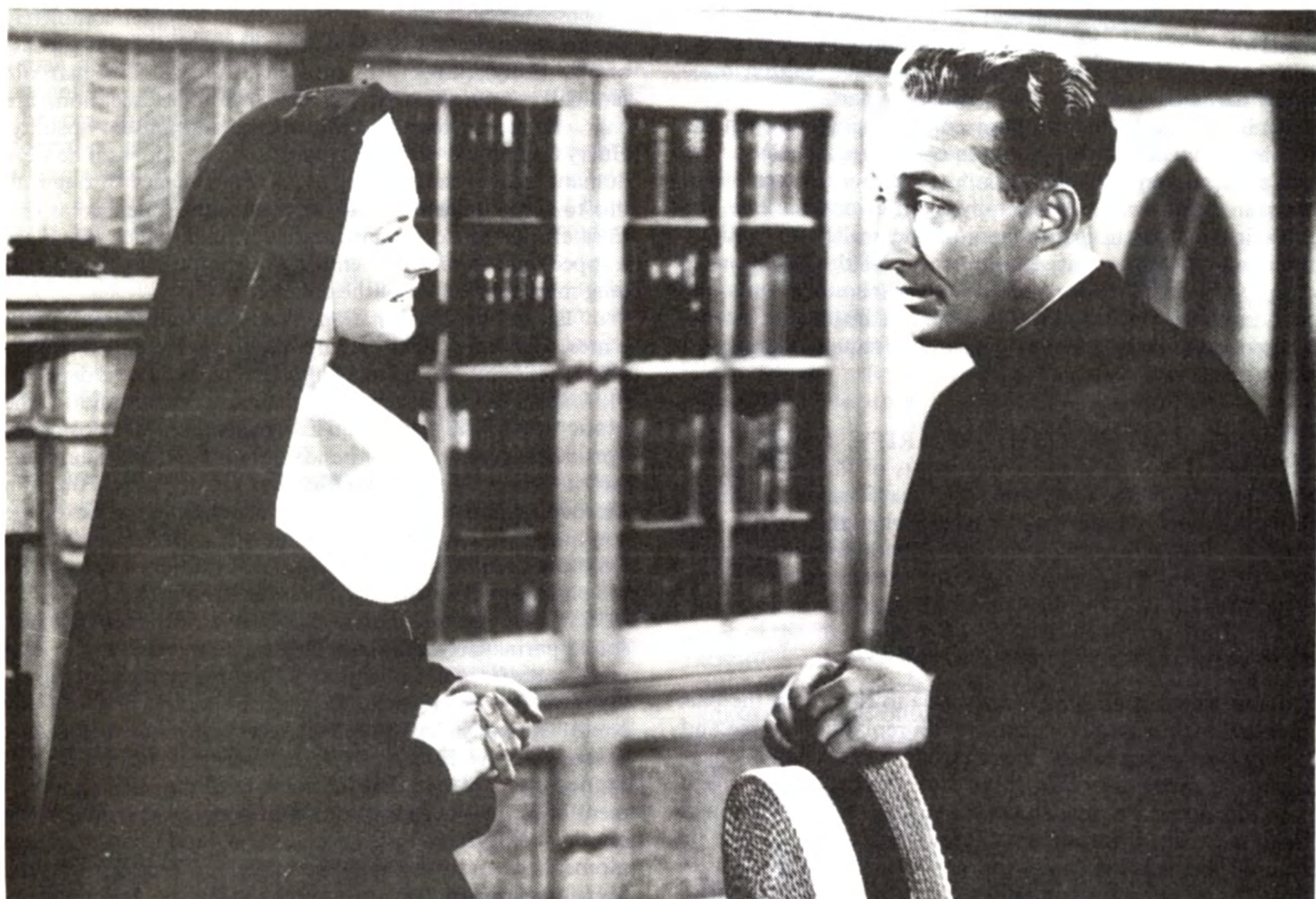
would be no society to worry about." Poague (I must retort) is 'clearly wrong in *this*.' What the passage testifies to is the difficulty of thinking outside the terms of one's own culture and moving outside its dominant ideology: the difficulty, for so many people, of even imagining a radical stance. It is simply not true that "were there no families there would be no society to worry about": it is perfectly easy to postulate a culture in which children were raised in communes. Perhaps the fault was mine initially: I should have specified that I was referring to the family as the concept is understood within our own culture, i.e. the patriarchal nuclear family. Numberless other forms of organization could exist to which the term 'family' could still be applicable: families, for instance, that were neither patriarchal nor nuclear nor biological. Mark Poster's admirable book *Critical Theory of the Family* is useful here: Poster examines various models of familial organization, concluding that the patriarchal nuclear family aggravates all the worst potentialities of family life and virtually eliminates all the best. At the most extreme, I have heard that within certain Polynesian cultures the children don't know who their biological parents were, and wander from hut to hut as they please (and depending, presumably, on their welcome), choosing provisional or temporary parents. This may be more myth than reality (I am no anthropologist), but it is quite within the bounds of human possibility and seems immensely attractive (I think McCarey would have loved it). A corollary would be a transformation of our culture's organization of sexuality along similar lines, its closest existing equivalent (deeply compromised, because socially marginalized and insulated) being gay bathhouses. Poague's argument seems to rest upon an inability fully to grasp the phenomenon of ideology, which he consistently naturalizes: "McCarey has had the courage to confront one of *life's* (my emphasis) most basic problems head on." A problem that is clearly social (hence resolvable through radical change) becomes a problem of 'life,' presumably permanent and intractable beyond 'liberal' reforms or the goodwill of the individual.

Aside from *Rally* (which, curiously, Poague omits from his list of McCarey's 'family' films—it is the director's most devastating assault on our culture's dominant familial organization), two films are especially relevant here. Perhaps the key line in the whole of McCarey occurs about 25 minutes from the end of *Make Way for Tomorrow* (significantly, it marks the precise point where an extremely good film transforms itself into a great one): Victor Moore's "Why not?" It is the film's turning point, its moment of instinctive anarchic rebellion: against capitalism and class oppression (the old couple have been intimidated by their sense that a ride in an expensive car is not for the likes of them), but subsequently, as the anarchic impulse develops in irrevocable escalation from the utterance of those two simple words, against the family, the ultimate revolutionary act being the rejection of Nellie's roast and the casual familial hypocrisy it represents (and which the old couple, themselves the victims of dominant ideological norms, have helped to foster). The culminating moment of the film (unobtrusively 'thrown away' as if McCarey himself didn't recognize its full significance, yet the most deadly serious of 'jokes')—closely echoed, as we shall see, in *Rally*—is the husband's act, as the old couple bid each other their last goodbye beside the train, of symbolically unmarried

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**OPPOSITE:** Above—*Rally 'Round The Flag, Boys*: Domestic tensions (Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward). Below—*The Bells of St. Mary's*: Crosby and Bergman.







them by addressing his wife by her maiden name ("It's been lovely knowing you, Miss Breckinridge"—one of the most heartrending moments in the whole of cinema): the family is annihilated in a phrase, along with the (legal) marriage, in order to celebrate the reality of the couple's mutual commitment. (*The Awful Truth*, one might add parenthetically, can have a happy ending because the couple's 'family' consists of a dog; and *Good Sam* can reinstate its family only by dumping everything on the woman, in the most unpleasant resolution in all McCarey.)

There is one McCarey film that moves tentatively (and somewhat ambiguously) towards a definition of the positive potentials of the family: *The Bells of St. Mary's*. The crucial condition for this definition is that the 'father' is a priest and the 'mother' a nun: there is no question of legal marriage, biological parentage, or the construction of the family as it exists within patriarchal capitalist culture, with its division of labour and resulting gender roles; the 'parents' don't own the children, the children are not tied to the 'parents' by any bond of filial duty. The organization, in fact, has some elements in common with that of my (mythical?) Polynesians, though the problem of authority remains, and is raised to an extent within the film. The key scene here is not only built upon, but is *about*, improvisation: the rehearsal for the Christmas play, wherein Father O'Malley is restrained by 'Sister Superior' from interfering with the children's spontaneous inventions, and which takes place in the presence of both 'parents' who relinquish control to the children. Against the St. Mary's family is set the real family, the broken and impossible family of patriarchal capitalist reality, with its burden of socially constructed gender-roles: the wandering man who has been unable to sustain the responsibilities of settling down, the woman who, deprived of her role of wife, has resorted to the alternative role of prostitute. The marital reunion (engineered and supervised by O'Malley, and from which Sister Superior is significantly absent—McCarey, with his sensitivity to star presences, must have realized intuitively that he could not ask Ingrid Bergman to direct *that* play) is among the most acutely embarrassing scenes in the whole of cinema, the embarrassment shared by characters and audience. Very likely McCarey (like most viewers) took the scene at face value as a 'happy ending,' in which case one must insist that the painfulness of the realization entirely undercuts the conservative conformism of the intention. If one applies to McCarey, as I think one should, words like 'honesty' and 'sincerity,' it is to assert his instinctive incapability of convincingly realizing what are frequently dishonest intentions.

**I**N THE INTERESTS OF CLARITY, I WANT TO discuss the four major components of *Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys* (the family, sexuality, the Tuesday Weld subplot, the missile base) before considering the climax (the pageant, where everything comes together) and anti-climax (the obligatory 'happy ending,' with its restoration of an order the film has thoroughly discredited).

### **The Family**

If the film has nothing exactly new to say about the patriarchal nuclear family, it says it with remarkable force and clarity, and with a refusal of compromise made possible perhaps only by the adoption of the comic mode. We are given:

a. The home. Putnam's Landing (where, in anticipation of the film's climax, Samuel Putnam was scalped as soon as he landed) has become the 'ideal' garden suburb, 70 minutes from New York by commuter train, each house a neat,

immaculate, well-appointed family prison.

b. The division of labour. If the home is a prison, the wife is its chief prisoner. Ford's convincing celebration of monogamy/family in *Drums Along the Mohawk* depended (I argued) on the film's being set in a particular, and very early, phase of American history, specifically, a phase where the family was self-supporting and (to a degree, backed by a strong sense of community) self-sufficient: husband and wife could work side by side in the fields in labour that was directly productive, its fruits directly enjoyed. In *Rally* the husband (Harry Bannerman/Paul Newman) commutes while the wife (Grace/Joanne Woodward) manages the house and children; the husband arrives home in a state of exhaustion and frustration, wanting nothing but alcohol, to confront a preoccupied wife and alienated children. The gender-division of *Drums* (the man works to build civilisation for the woman who both embodies and perpetuates its finer values) has here reached its culmination: the civilisation initiated by the building of the cabin and the subjugation of the Indians has developed to a point where it is characterized by overwhelming and continuous repression and frustration, the couple separated for most of their lives as breadwinner and nurturer respectively, and engaged in uncreative and unfulfilling labour.

c. Oedipus in the suburbs. The children (both boys), as a direct result of this total division of labour, are consistently in their mother's charge, the father an intruder who drops in every evening just before bedtime. The film anticipates, in other words, a perception now common in post-Freudian thinking: that the Oedipus complex is not some 'natural' process that every child in every culture must pass through, but a product of our specific social/sexual arrangements. The father's return from alienated labour (in one of its extreme forms—'Public Relations') is 'greeted' by a series of unconscious/'accidental' responses: the boys (i) completely ignore him in favour of television, (ii) spill his drink (the last of the whisky), (iii) defy his authority. Indeed, all the marital/familial relationships in the film, without exception, are characterized by tension, ambivalence and mutual hostility: Harry's comment on his firstborn is "I love him as if he were human." Characteristically, McCarey manages through all this to communicate his affection for human beings (as distinct from the social institutions within which they are trapped) and to suggest, beneath the frustrations, the continuing mutual affection of the couple.

d. Escape and sublimation. Harry escapes, Grace sublimates. The film is clear that all that makes Henry's life tolerable is the combination of alcohol (the whiskey he is deprived of, first on the train, then at home) and sexual fantasy (the exotic 'movies' he projects on his eyelids simply by closing his eyes). Grace, on the other hands, sublimates her sexual energies into civic 'duty,' the efficaciousness of which the film thoroughly undercuts: her obsessive committee work for the community (including the 'Committee for the Preservation of Unknown Landmarks,' a title that beautifully encapsulates the phantasmal nature of the benefits to society).

It will be noticed that so far I have not made the film sound particularly hilarious. This is intentional. On the level of thematic/ideological concerns, the raw material of Hollywood movies is in general not genre-specific: that of *Rally* could as easily have been inflected toward melodrama (*There's Always Tomorrow*) or the horror film (*The Shining*). Suffice it to say here that the comedy of the opening movement of *Rally*—its exposition of family life—is built entirely on the conformity/resistance tension, and that there are moments when the exchanges between the two stars irresistibly (if unexpectedly) evoke Laurel and Hardy. As for auteur-



ism, the key moment of this opening section eloquently repeats the 'unmarrying' motif I noted from the end of *Make Way for Tomorrow*: "We had more home life *before* we were married, Grace Oglethorpe."

### **Sexuality.**

A friend once remarked to me in conversation: "There is nothing so desexualizing as monogamy": a pithy way of putting Freud's perception that the monogamous union on which the nuclear family is based (monogamy, at least, for the wife, and in theory for the husband) requires the repression or sublimation of enormous quantities of 'excess' sexual energy. In *Drums Along the Mohawk*, the degree of necessary repression is relatively low, and the possibility of successful (i.e. satisfying) sublimation strong: husband and wife live, work, play, fight the enemy, side by side, and are members of a close-knit and highly motivated community that at times (in the childbirth sequence, the Halloween dance, and especially in the person of Mrs. McClennan) takes on the character of an extended family. In *Rally*, all such potentialities have disappeared. It is particularly necessary (for the guarantee of the patriarchal lineage) that the women be desexualized. The unhappy consequence of this is that, if the process is really successful, the wife may no longer feel sexual desires for anyone, including her husband: hence the sexual frustration of Harry, a dutifully monogamous male whose wife prefers committees. The primary motivation of his fantasy movies is clearly the desire to re-sexualize Grace: she functions in them as exotic Arabian seductress. The embodiment of unrepressed sexuality in the film is Angela Harper/Joan Collins (unhappily married—consciously and explicitly so, as against Harry's over-insistent protestations of his 'happiness'—childless, and with little interest in committees). Angela's campaign to seduce Harry (who reveals repeatedly, if inadvertently, that he wants to be tempted) provides the main impetus of the film's first half, producing a series of magnificent comic set-pieces: the car-ride from the station; the scene in Angela's home where she gets him drunk, and a logical progress of de-repression that links the film directly to the screwball comedies of the '30s culminates in his swinging from a chandelier; the showdown in the New York hotel. This last—besides providing Newman with an elaborate Oliver Hardy routine involving his trousers—has as its climax the moment when Grace, turning up to surprise her husband, confronts Angela emerging from the bedroom performing an exotic (ambiguously Arabian/Indian) dance in a bedspread. The ambiguity of the dance's ethnicity allows us to connect it both to Grace's seductions in Harry's fantasies and to Angela's Indian dance in the pageant, the erotic (banished from the home) returning as the exotic. As usual with McCarey all the performances in *Rally* are superb, every scene animated by continual inventions of mime and body-language; but one senses that he was drawn particularly to Joan Collins, who realizes here a comic potential one would scarcely have guessed at. It is striking that the character, against all generic expectations and requirements, is never put down or punished, and is actually permitted to intrude briefly into the final scene of marital reconciliation. As the embodiment (on the level of family/monogamy) of anarchy, she is in some respects the film's true centre, a point well understood in France: the French title for the film was *La Brune Brûlante*, inspired no doubt by Angela's pageant persona, Princess Flaming Teepee.

### **Boys and Boojums: the new generation.**

The film's other potentially subversive figure is Comfort

Goodpasture/Tuesday Weld. The conflicting connotations of her name (erotic/Puritan) sum up the ambiguity of her role. In so far as she embodies teenage rebellion (in her spiritedness, her energy, her slangy vocabulary, her readiness to dump an unwanted but persistent and presumptuous suitor in the middle of a lake), it is a rebellion that can be easily contained. I have not been able to ascertain whether the term 'boojum' was in current use in the late '50s or was invented for the film (perhaps by McCarey himself: the song "Seein' as how you're my boojum" is credited to him); it may also derive from the Max Shulman novel, which I haven't read. In any case, it is Comfort's readiness to be somebody's 'boojum' that defines her: the word, very obviously a male construction evoking 'boobs' and 'yum-yum,' on the one hand expresses her overt sexuality, on the other her consumability, her willingness to become the possession of a male. Tuesday Weld's reactions (really indescribable in words—a marvelous manifestation of the McCareyan use of body-language and facial expression) to the song as sung to her by the soldier from the South (Opie/Tom Gilson) beautifully capture the combination of energy and subjugation. It is fitting, then, that in the pageant Comfort is cast as Pocahontas, the betrayer of her race, her saving of Captain John Smith historically emblematic of the triumph of white imperialism.

### **From the Nuclear Family to Nuclear Missiles.**

Although it provides one of the major narrative threads, the explicitly political issue of the film need not detain us long: McCarey's satirical treatment speaks for itself, his anarchic disrespect for the military mentality and the political authority that sustains it (and which it in turn sustains) going back at least to *Duck Soup*. Again one might note the trans-generic nature of basic thematic material: the type of accident that launches the (harmless) missile in *Rally* could, in a 'serious' film, launch an atomic warhead. McCarey refuses to endorse any political position dramatized within the film, the confrontation of the military and the women of Putnam's Landing being treated as another comic set-piece in which both sides are absurd. On the one side is the gross stupidity of the military mind as represented by Captain Hoxie (Jack Carson, directed to play the role as a kind of malignant Oliver Hardy); on the other, the women are not protesting against nuclear energy (they don't know at this stage that the army are building a missile base) but against the disrupting influence of soldiers on the (repressive) orderliness of their town. They are specifically motivated by concern for the safety of their daughters—who welcome the soldiers as liberators.

### **The Pageant.**

It should be clear by this point that the film offers, through its complex juxtapositions, a fairly comprehensive and thoroughly negative portrayal of modern American capitalist society: the patriarchal nuclear family, alienated labour, the repression of sexuality (the root of anarchy), the repressiveness of the modern small-town-cum-suburbia, the monstrous absurdity of military authority and technology-as-power (backed by the 'democratic' political machinery). All this is linked from the outset (the opening commentary) to the founding of America, and it is that founding that becomes the subject of the pageant. By casting Angela as Princess Flaming Teepee (again the association of subversive women with fire that I discussed in *CineAction!* 2) the film makes explicit the connection between the Indians and sexuality—specifically, sexual threat, the potential disruption/destruction of monogamy/family—that I argued haunts *Drums*





The natives of Putnam's Landing.

*Along the Mohawk* as disturbing subtext. But the point of the pageant—intended by Grace, its organizer and narrator, to culminate in the smoking of the peace-pipe, the establishment of order, hence of modern America—is its collapse into ignominious chaos, a collapse that embodies the film's comedic wish-fulfilment that American civilisation had never existed. What was planned as a celebration of order becomes a celebration of anarchy, centred on the Indians, hence the culmination and reversal of a whole tradition of history/mythology: the progress of the film is from the un-marrying of the couple to the un-making of America. Captain John Smith (Opie) is burnt at the stake, the Indians massacre the Pilgrim Fathers, Governor John Carver (Captain Hoxie) falls off Plymouth Rock, the Mayflower sinks.

#### ***The 'Happy End'.***

Those familiar with the film will realize that I cheated slightly in describing the scene of the pageant as its climax: it is followed by the lengthy (and brilliant) comic sequence at the missile base. I confess that when I started writing this article my memory had reversed the order of the two scenes (impossible, in terms of the narrative line), and I only recognized the error when I rechecked. I think the mistake is significant: the pageant is indeed the film's logical climax, the statement toward which its thematic development moves. One function of the missile base sequence is to prepare for the 'happy ending' by facilitating the husband/wife reconcili-

ation (anticipated by Grace's dive into the sea to rescue Harry at the end of the pageant). The restoration of the social norms is both ideologically and generically obligatory: it is unthinkable that a classical American comedy should end with the abolition of home/family, though the film's logic demands precisely that. Yet, given the McCareyan thematic, it is notable that the 'happy ending' is only made possible by the expedient of surreptitiously eliminating the family in order to reaffirm the couple. In the control room at the missile base Harry and Grace join forces to (inadvertently) send Hoxie into space, and Harry repeats the act of 'unmarrying,' the motif here receiving fuller development. First, Harry reveals that he thought Grace (who can't swim) was attempting suicide when she dived into the water. In response to his mild rebuke that she wasn't thinking of their motherless children, she replies that she was "thinking of their father." This clears the way for Harry's tender "Grace Oglethorpe, home we go." But in a strikingly perfunctory coda we see the couple, not at home, but in the New York hotel on the second honeymoon that Grace's familial and social commitments had earlier prevented. The 'happy ending' is of course an illusion and an evasion: nothing in the couple's fictional situation has actually changed, home, family and alienated labour are still there (if conveniently forgotten). The best one can say is that Angela's continuing presence is at least acknowledged: she telephones from her bathtub; Harry hangs up—for the time being? □



# RECONSIDERING The Quiet Man

by Ken Nolley

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO WRITE ABOUT Ford's *The Quiet Man* with any of the grace and ease that arises out of carefully considered, settled opinion. For many years, I viewed the film with affection and talked of it with confident, critical satisfaction. But for some time now, it has been a film which provokes strongly conflicting responses in me, responses which exemplify my mixed feelings about the classical Hollywood cinema and its role in the individual and collective experience of its audience.

That conflict is heightened for me through a profoundly wrenching juxtaposition—I recently rewatched *The Quiet Man* and found it as amiable and delightful in many ways as it ever was for me, and I have just finished a weekend with Peter Watkins' monumental new film, *The Journey*, a 14½ hour exploration of the arms race from the perspective of people in 12 different countries around the world. And I had better add at the outset that I worked on the Watkins project and thus am by no means merely a disinterested observer of it. For reasons I shall try to explore later, Watkins' film calls into question the amiability and delightfulness of Ford's film as well as the wisdom of our critical preoccupation with it.

Let me begin by considering *The Quiet Man* in the rather more traditional terms that create my mainly sympathetic response to the film. *The Quiet Man* is, in many ways, Ford's central statement on the constitution of the nuclear family and the relationship of that family to the social whole, a construct that was at the heart of most of his films, though it is often given very different emphases and roles in the narrative. *The Grapes of Wrath* had explored the disintegration of the extended family as an exploitive but stable agrarian order is overturned by the invasion of the forces of venture capital. The military trilogy (I prefer that label as more appropriately descriptive than the usual cavalry trilogy) had constructed an image of the family in wartime, exploring engendered tensions between the microcosmic social unit and the aggressive ambitions of the larger order. Taken together, the three films expose and seek to resolve the contradictions inherent in American society at war.

The preoccupations of *The Quiet Man*, however, clearly reveal its position as a film emerging from the era after World War II, and indeed in the midst of the Korean War, as Brandon French has already argued.<sup>1</sup> Its central character, Sean Thornton, is a fighter who has done his fighting in a foreign land, only to return home in hopes of finding peace and quiet. Thornton's needs to marry and buy a home are precisely the needs of the post-war, recently demobbed combat veteran, and the difficulties he has in meeting both of these needs are at the heart of the narrative. What is remarkable about the film is its ability to evoke sympathy with Sean's current position as an outsider in the land of his birth and to link that marginal position to the marginality of unmarried and widowed women as it seeks to integrate all of this unlikely group into the social whole.

Sean's arrival in Castletown in the opening shots of the film reveal the initial contradictions and tensions that drive

the narrative. Thornton's exit from the train provokes wonder and comment, the crowd of railroad employees and townsfolk gathers round him as an especially unusual curiosity, and his difference from the community is marked by the contrast between his tweedy brown clothes and the black worn by everyone else. And finally, the simplicity and clarity of his desire to get to Innisfree, and thus to home, family and peace, is markedly at odds with the seething, combative nature of the Irish community as it is immediately revealed. Whereas melodrama would construct a sense of ominous foreboding out of this clash, comedy here dissolves the initial tension, apparently at least, in laughter.

But the frustrations of the drive for domestic tranquility are only beginning. The dream home, White-o-Morn, is not initially available for sale to a newcomer, and in any case, established community interests in the form of Squire Danaher, the man of greatest economic and physical power in Innisfree, step in to try to block his way. Further, though the key to Thornton's acceptance by much of the community (the male portion at least) is his patriarchal lineage, he is most bound to the village by maternal memories of the childhood cottage and the flowers that surrounded it.

Thornton, then, clings to a nostalgic, childlike perception of the world to which he returns, a perception that denies aggression and competition as it exalts the domestic world of the nuclear family. Much of the difficulty which attends his integration into the combative and assertive community, as it turns out, grows out of the fact that he is taken as an adult (and thus potentially powerful and aggressive) by the community, while he seeks to resume a role from his childhood. But, in fact, the gap between his reticence and the eager community expectations of him provides a tension that makes for much of the film's satisfaction, while the resolution of that tension and the reassertion of competition is the source of many of the difficulties with the conclusion.

Thornton does recover White-o-Morn without very much trouble, of course, and that process openly and uncritically exploits his nostalgic memories. His initial view of the cottage is accompanied by his mother's voice-over recollection and by a harp. And when the nostalgic vision is denigrated by his guide and driver ("Ah, that's nothing but a wee, humble cottage . . . now why would a Yankee from Pittsburgh want to buy it?"), Sean's response is an emphatic affirmation of the importance of memory:

I'll tell you why, Michaelleen og Flynn, young small Michael Flynn who used to wipe my runny nose when I was a kid—because I'm Sean Thornton, and I was born in that little cottage. I've come home, and home I'm going to stay. Now does that answer your questions once and for all, you nosy little man?

The lush orchestral background to the speech and Michaelleen's warm response seem calculated to endorse further Sean's memories and to produce a richly responsive reaction in an audience, especially a '50s audience.

But the next sequence, in which Sean is introduced to Lonergan, the parish priest, and gets his first glimpse of Mary Kate Danaher, complicates matters somewhat. The shots of



Mary Kate from Sean's point of view moving amidst the trees and the sheep are again accompanied by the harp that earlier underlay Sean's mother's voice. Here, however, the effect, especially when combined with the slightly low angle mid-shot of Mary Kate's cool gaze back at him, has always seemed to me to be incongruous, a fact that is underscored by Sean's question and Michaelleen's response:

SEAN: Is that real? She couldn't be.

MICHAELEEN: Nonsense, man. It's only a mirage brought on by our temporary thirst.

Structurally, then, the opening sequences endorse the idealization of home and undermine the idealization of woman. Much of the comedy of the film derives from that undermining, but the continued affirmation of the idealized home keeps the comedy richly sentimental.

However, the romantic distortion inherent in Sean's initial view of Mary Kate is further underscored in the next sequence at church the following morning. Sean's advances to her at the font are severely criticized as hasty and ill-advised by Michaelleen, who also suggests that her combativeness and lack of a fortune make her unmarriageable. This sequence first raises the issue of economic dependency which characterizes male/female relationships in this community, an issue Sean is initially inclined to ignore.

That threat of dependency is contrasted with the power of an independent woman in the next sequence in the Widow Tillane's house, where she sits authoritatively at her desk; the men, first Sean and Michaelleen, and later Squire Danaher, stand before her, hats in hand, in the role of petitioners. It is further underscored by the tiny maid's peremptory order to the hulking Danaher to "wipe your muddy boots."

That the idealized home is the abode of the nuclear family, and not necessarily the extended family, is made clear very quickly, however, and the next sequence in Danaher's kitchen reveals the frustration and rage of a woman made dependent by laws of male primogeniture. In this sequence, Danaher's male employees sit at table and are served by the standing Mary Kate. Danaher's entrance routs the male eaters, but leads directly to a confrontation with his sister—he goes for a poker and Mary Kate for a large crock pot, which she slams on the table with a resounding thump and a threat, revealing personal female power and determination to be quite the match for male power, which is, however, institutionalized and thus ascendent.

And the confrontation erupts here over Mary Kate's spontaneous approval of the Widow's sale of the cottage to Sean Thornton, not only because of Mary Kate's obvious fascination and sympathy for him, but also for her sense of class identity with another woman ("Good for Widow Tillane!"). Sean's rivalry with Danaher for the cottage has thus made him an ally of the fiercer of Innisfree's women against the village patriarchy, an alliance that is underscored by the immediate sympathy that flows between the outsider and those oppressed, both being excluded from the locus of power in the community.

To this point, then, the movie seems calculated to create in the audience a desire to see Mary Kate move from Danaher's kitchen, where she is a servant in open rebellion and where the comedy is openly and bitterly revealing of that fact, to White-o-Morn and into Sean's bed, which remains a largely idealized place for the audience, especially so because Sean is presented as outside the male power structure of Innisfree and in opposition to the principal focus of its tyranny, Danaher. And that bed of Sean's ("as big as a parade ground") seems less confining than the kitchen, even as Sean seems to

be the sort of potential husband who poses little threat to Mary Kate's freedom.

Thus, the film creates in the audience a desire for the liberation of Mary Kate that is linked to a desire for the union of her and Sean, a union made all the more desirable because of the idealized cottage in which it would take place. I shall not continue to move through the film chronologically to discuss how this liberation/union is achieved, but I think it is fair to summarize it by saying that the most satisfying comedy in the film occurs in the first half, in the part of the film before the marriage. In that portion of the narrative, Mary Kate's freedom and equality are a primary focus in a way that they will not continue to be later.

After the marriage, Mary Kate's insistence on the receipt of her dowry emphasizes the importance of her continued independence, as Molly Haskell has rightly argued.<sup>2</sup> But the film's narrative structure seems only to endorse clearly the rightness of her insistence upon receiving her *things*, her furniture and family possessions (and thus the correctness of her rejection of sex on her wedding night), while distancing itself and the audience from her determination to continue to resist until her dowry is paid. So after the furniture is delivered, and Sean expresses disdain for the still unpaid money, she asks, "What manner of man is it that I have married?"; and the reply is, "A better one, I think, than you know, Mary Kate."

Through the section of the film from the delivery of the furniture on the day after the wedding at least to the evening of the consummation of the marriage, the narrative tension arises much less out of a need for accommodation on Sean's part than for a need of acceptance on Mary Kate's part, an acceptance that amounts to her surrender to an appropriate, worthy, and hence trustable male authority. Her surrender is ordered by the ultimate male authority in the village, Father Lonergan, who tells her that "in Ireland, a married man sleeps in a bed and not in a bag," and marked visually by her giving a large stick to Sean before the fireplace in the cottage upon his return home.

That key scene mutes and sentimentalizes her surrender, suggesting that female subjugation in White-o-Morn is somehow different than it was in her brother's house. The red of Maureen O'Hara's hair and the red in Mary Kate's skirt, which had earlier been linked to her fiery temper, here merge with the comfort and warmth of the fire on the domestic hearth before which she stands, suggesting a chastened and tamed sexual passion. And the reverse angle shot that follows the hearth surrender scene, a shot of her perched on the arm of Sean's chair, merges the rich blue of her blouse with the blues of the china in the hutch behind, linking her visually with the domestic stability and tranquility of the "300 years of dreaming" she earlier associated with her furniture. The blue of her blouse (the colour she wears most in the film) also perhaps suggests the colour of the holy mother, Mary, thus linking her simultaneously to the idealized memory of Sean's mother and the cottage of his childhood, as well as to the ultimate image of the "appropriate" women's role.

For all the rollicking Ford humour and geniality of the rest of the film, it is what remains after the marriage that bothers me most and seems now least defensible in the film. What Mary Kate's surrender finally comes to in a male dominant community is the humiliation of a five mile forced walk back from Castletown and the brutality of being physically thrown

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OPPOSITE: The Quiet Man









John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara in **The Quiet Man**.

at her brother's feet, a subjugation emphasized by the reappearance of the stick now offered by a woman in the crowd "to beat the lovely lady." Nor is there any significant mitigation of this subjugation in Mary Kate's triumphant exit before the fight, or in the sense of success she seems to feel when Sean finally asserts himself in terms the community can understand. And the end of the film presents Mary Kate serving food to her husband and brother in the kitchen of the cottage, an image (though presented as emblematic of reconciliation and harmony) that uncomfortably reconstructs the servant pattern of Danaher's kitchen earlier.

The pleasure we can feel in Mary Kate's maintained dignity and strength at the end of the film is muted considerably by an awareness of the fact that she (and the film) has settled for much less than she might have gotten from Sean, that they had the potential for a much more balanced and equal relationship earlier, that the film is now presenting, and in large measure endorsing, a sexual union that is more restrictive and less free than the narrative might have afforded.

*The Quiet Man* clearly does seek to give image to the frustrations experienced by a generation engaged in constructing the post-war world. It was a generation of men disillusioned with violence and wary of unrestrained economic competition ("I went in there to beat his brains out, to drive him into the canvas, to murder him. And that's what I did. And for what? Purse, a piece of the gate, lousy money."). And it was a

generation of women seeking a freedom which they had tasted during the war and sought to consolidate after it. But in its resolution, the film limits and restricts the sphere of competition and battle, only to reinstate and rejustify that sphere once more. And having provided a rich portrait of the bondage of women and the rebellion against those limits, the film reconstitutes the male order, now more responsive and supportive than before, but ascendent again nonetheless. It moderates male competition and female bondage with the richly evocative values of love and trust, without finally undermining or replacing either.

All of this argument might well lead to a simpler acceptance of the first half of the film and a rejection of the second half if it were not for the complicating effects of the film's ironic and very visibly constructed discourse. From the introduction of the narrator early on as Father Lonergan first appears ("Now then, there comes myself . . . that tall saintly-looking man"), there is an engagingly ironic, self-mocking tone to the film which reveals its own pretensions, its naive idealizations of home, its complicity with classic narrative structures. Sean's (and the film's) fantasy view of White-o-Morn is undercut by the Widow Tillane's early biting comments about turning it into a national shrine as well as by Mrs. Playfair's ironic praise: "It looks like all Irish cottages should look, and seldom do. And only an American would have thought of emerald green." When Mary Kate



and Ford's narrative finally conspire to force the unwilling Sean into action against Danaher to recover the dowry, the delighted Michaelleen Flynn hums the film's main theme to get the orchestral accompaniment started, the surface of the film colluding openly with its structure in a highly revealing way.

That self-mocking irony which especially pervades the second half of the film undercuts in some measure the unpleasant betrayal of the earlier pacifist and feminist concerns of the film by exposing to a mild ridicule the ideology that creates the film's closure. And if the early '50s sought to replace the ideological challenges to dominant social structures of their day with the purely personal resolutions of two decent people within the confines of a traditional heterosexual relationship and the nuclear family, in this film at least they were able to construct an image of that resolution that revealed the pomposity, pretension and duplicity of the re-established order.

Or so I would have often liked to argue in attempting to rescue the film from a too-simplistic dismissal as exemplary of a triumphant male discourse. And yet, perhaps, some such dismissal is justified, and in order to confront that question, let me refer to Peter Watkins' new film, *The Journey*, which I mentioned at the outset.

Watkins' film is a remarkable achievement, created of necessity entirely apart from the traditional production channels and with the support of a volunteer grassroots effort worldwide.<sup>3</sup> There is, perhaps, no precedent for a film of its scope and ambition in the history of the cinema, certainly not one produced in the manner that this one was. And the film is a probing, self-conscious exploration of people's movement toward liberation and understanding which takes as a part of its subject the construction of media images and the systematic ways in which these images predetermine conclusions. It is, then, at least partly a self-conscious critique of the discourse of the popular media, particularly television, but its examination embraces the methods and preoccupations of the classic cinema as well, at least by implication.

*The Journey* would imply, at least, that Ford's film supports the militaristic and exploitive structures of our society, as Laura Mulvey, Julia Kristeva, Ann Kaplan and others have shown how the dominant Hollywood discourse consistently and almost unerringly supports the patriarchal order. And if I argue, as I have here, that in comparison to the general pattern of classical Hollywood form, *The Quiet Man* allows some remarkable fragments of another yet-to-be-created discourse to remain in its final structure, I am not confident that is quite enough.

To a large degree, the praise accorded *The Quiet Man* by critics like Molly Haskell and Brandon French arises out of this sense of the degree to which the film works against the grain, and subverts, even in small ways, the dominant discourse of the era. My argument in this essay stands very close to that one. On the other hand, the sweeping critique of classical cinema offered by Mulvey or Kaplan (or of the dominant media by Watkins) arises from a refusal to accord significance to what may in the end only be minor deviations from the norm.

Yet Watkins' film, as a current project which has had to struggle vigorously and persistently for its very existence and will have to continue to struggle to find screens and audiences, raises another issue here—the issue of the relationship between history and criticism, between past and present, between the dominant and alternative cinemas. In some sense, the critical issue between Ford's film and Watkins' film is a little different than the issue between the cinema of Lucas

or Spielberg on the one hand and a politically committed alternative cinema on the other.

Insofar as the commodified Hollywood product subverts other production by soaking up all available production funding, dominating the marketing system, and thus cornering and controlling access to the mass audience, it must be perceived as inimical to a more radical cinema and should be fairly subjected to a harsh and sweeping critique. But that same classical cinema of the past really only competes in a minor way for access to the marketing system and audiences (even though it certainly has created an institutionalized discourse that supports current patterns of production investment); films like *The Quiet Man* clearly compete less directly with the current alternative cinema.

That difference, I think, makes it often feel more important to be a harsh critic of current production while allowing a certain indulgence of the past. It encourages a rejection of the compromised pleasures of the present while permitting the classic pleasures of the *auteur* tradition, for it is really the struggle for screen space and screen time that is at issue in the long run for the critic. It may be that *The Quiet Man* deserves qualified congratulations for the cracks it opens up in the dominant patterns of its time, and it is undoubtedly the function of the film historian to point out such achievements.

Yet I find myself wondering increasingly whether in the struggle to restate the present and to shape a different future, access to production support, screens and audiences isn't a more pressing concern than an entirely neat and fair balancing of classic achievements. Perhaps the appreciation of classic Hollywood comedy is much less worth our time than the active support of a current cinema that can use much more critical support than it usually receives. □

## NOTES

1. Brandon French, *On the Verge of Revolt: Women in American Films of the Fifties*, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1978, p. 20.
2. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, New York: Penguin Books, 1973, p. 269.
3. The film is not yet in general release, but it played at the Berlin Film Festival in February and had its US premiere in Utica, New York in April. For a good discussion of the film, see Scott MacDonald, "The Means Justify the Ends: Peter Watkins from *The War Game* to *The Journey*," *Afterimage* 14 (April 1987), pp. 4-7.

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# THE FALLS

by Paul Della Penna & Jim Shedden

One fine morning, I awoke to discover that, during the night, I had learned to understand the language of birds. I have listened to them ever since. They say: "Look at me!" or: "Get out of here!" or "Let's fuck!" or: "Help!" or: "Hurrah!" or: "I found a worm!" and that's *all* they say. And that, when you boil it down, is about all we say.

(Which of those things am I saying now?)

—Hollis Frampton

**T**HE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY OCCUPY A hybrid space between two dominant traditions in cinema, the American avant-garde (especially the "structural" filmmaking of Frampton, Gehr, Conner, Snow, et al), and the European "art" film of the 1960s (the work of Alain Resnais comes particularly to mind), sharing none of the former's supposed inaccessibility and none of the latter's narrative insistence. Greenaway's mainstream acceptance (both *The Draughtsman's Contract* and *A Zed and Two Noughts* had relatively successful commercial runs) has not compromised his fundamentally formal and aesthetic concerns.

*The Falls* is a transitional film marking Greenaway's foray into feature length filmmaking, after a 15-year stint at editing what he himself has termed "soft-core propaganda" films for Britain's Central Office of Information. During this time, Greenaway also made several highly stylised experimental shorts which bear their noticeable imprint on his later work, in particular *The Falls*, with its foregrounding of theoretical questions specific to cinema—in a manner quite distinct and removed from the *Screen*-inspired "theory" films of Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey.

At its simplest level, *The Falls* is a parody of that documentary mode which Greenaway became familiar with when he was editing films for the Office of Information—the objective, carefully researched "house style," characteristic of our own NFB. Whether or not it succeeds as parody is really irrelevant; three and a half hours of smarmy, playful, irreverence may or may not be worthy of sustained attention. What is truly interesting is the way *The Falls* operates as a critique of one of the central tenets of the modern enterprise: that is, the technocratic rage for order, the urge to arrange what is random, arbitrary, meaningless. The anarchic and much subtler pleasure grasped at this more sophisticated level of reading raises the film above the cheap laughs afforded by more typical, commercial satire of the documentary (e.g. Rob Reiner's *Spinal Tap* and Woody Allen's fatuous *Zelig*) and closer to the more serious-minded, but equally hilarious, projects of (post)modern writers like Borges, Calvino and Nabokov.

*The Falls* is composed of 92 wildly absurd biographies culled from the "latest edition of the Directory published

**OPPOSITE:** "This excessive, but essentially meaningless obsession with detail serves to homogenize the experience of individual victims."

every three years by the Committee investigating the Violent Unknown Event—the VUE for short," a random, though representative, cross-section of the 19 million survivors of this unexplained holocaust, whose surnames happen to begin with the letters F-A-L-L. Arranged alphabetically from 'Orchard Falla' through to 'Anthior Fallwaste,' each entry is accompanied by the same dead-pan voice-over (alternately male or female), often with a photograph of the victim (unless s/he wishes to remain anonymous wherein s/he is offered a choice of photographic pseudonyms), and stills or found footage to reconstruct the victim's post-VUE degeneracy. Recurrent aetiological patterns emerge, each victim blurs into the next. The result is an exhaustive, encyclopedic survey of 92 human lives, reduced to statistical and scientific data in the post-apocalyptic world where the need to categorize and classify—the whole apparatus of bureaucracy—remains intact.

A characteristic entry begins with an effluvia of adjectives, "pigeon-holing" the VUE victim with a surfeit of biographical phemes: "Starling Fallanx, [is a] singer, firework enthusiast, wanderer, collector of berets, bird-hats, and cardboard-boxes, authority on the nightingale . . .", or "the Director has registered Coppice Fallbatteo as an Italian speaking young male man, though the VUE has taken away his teeth, made him short of breath, flattened his nose, rearranged his sense of balance and restructured his colon, it has left him with the language he had learned as a two-year-old child." This excessive, but essentially meaningless obsession with detail serves to homogenize the experience of individual victims; far from generating a plurality of identities, lives, and emotion, such textual extravagance *represses* difference. The exhaustive lists and repetitions, as in the personal classified ads of our age, make each life indistinguishable from the next. What emerges in the course of the film, though, is an often poignant desire by the subjects themselves to deny and resist this totalitarian impulse towards classification.

One of the more curious symptoms of the VUE's fallout is its ability to affect a human being's genetic make-up with the crippling "potagium fallitis," a Darwinian mutation which sets the stage for the evolution of humans into bird-like flying creatures. More telling, however, is the VUE's tendency to radically alter not only language (each victim possesses his or her hitherto unknown and incomprehensible tongue), but also what Saussure called *langue* (language systems, the deep structure of consciousness itself). To cite one of many examples, is the case of the twins Ipson and Pulat Fallari:

Ipson spoke Allow-ese and Pulat spoke Capistan. Allow is terse and impersonal, full of abbreviations and imperatives as though invented for use on a Parade-Ground, or at best, for a writer of Instruction Manuals. Whilst Capistan is a lazy, gentle language spoken largely from the front of the mouth and requiring unusual amounts of saliva and an above exposure of the tongue. The two languages are as remote from one another as it appears possible to get.

This is, of course, the myth of Babel and the dispersion of languages, itself an apocalyptic event and a mythical account of difference. The other 'Fall' referred to in the film is the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, the men who would be birds, and similarly it is humanity's *hubris* which is responsible for



that descent. That the VUE is 'unknown' is significant; in the absence of any ultimate meaning or divine grace, humanity still finds the need to assign order and *telos* to a chaotic and random universe—to rationalize the ineffable. Here, however, blame is consigned to "the conspiracy of birds," itself a reference to a modern myth: Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, the revenge of Nature, of the Other, on the human will to mastery and domination.

The documentary form that *The Falls* most closely simulates relies heavily on the codes and conventions of the voice-over, traditionally male, but always authoritative, which structures the way in which images are interpreted. In such a form the image is supplement; the transcendent narrator governs our own reading. Gaps in knowledge are compensated for and recovered by the parasitical insertion of found footage and still photography, and reconstructed evidence. More often than not in *The Falls*, in the absence of the victims' participation we are shown indexes of their lives: photos of their houses and workplaces, relatives, images of sunsets and flowing water, anatomical diagrams—themselves obviously fabricated, inserted after the fact. But the deadpan grain of the voice, the associations we have come to expect with refined British accents—tone of authenticity—diverts our attention away from the fictional process of construction. Playing on our complete and complicit trust, *The Falls* would have us believe the most outlandish lies (and herein the source of much of its humour), so impressed are we with the sound of "technicalese," and impenetrable specialised argots. In this blackest of comedies, the ethical and political dimensions of the Violent Unknown Event, an apocalypse of epic proportions, are completely repressed—a gaping hole which the authoritative voice-over tries to elide in its efforts to restore the sane, rational order of things: that is, the endless litanies of symptoms, pseudo-scientific medical and psychological explanations (best represented by the tiresome, stuffy linguist who provides a running commentary throughout), which try to explain away what remains by the end of the film still "unknown."

Like an elaborate Borgesian conceit, *The Falls* is a fantastic taxonomy of such human anomalies and newly-required idiosyncracies—reminiscent in spirit of the Enlightenment preoccupation with ornate scientific classificatory systems for which Diderot and Vico stand as archetypal figures. This mode of discourse, analysed at length in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, compartmentalizes experience, assigning order and hierarchical relations to all aspects of the world as on a grid or table. It has governed the very structures of Western thought since the Renaissance, and we remain firmly entrenched within its reign: from the technocratic Empires of the East and West which are its clearest expression down to the thought processes of everyday life. It is not specific to any particular political ideology; in a sense it transcends ideology. Foucault, among others, has shown that Marxism, at least in its orthodox variants, remains very much a part of its inescapable logic. *The Falls* would suggest that a holocaust of such magnitude would not in any way alter our internalized submission to these very structures of thought—that we would re-build anew the simulacra of our *only* conception of the Real.

Like the cartographers of the Empire in Borges that Baudrillard refers to, every detail of the kingdom must be mapped onto the grid, so that it is the map itself which becomes *real* to us, our only connection or engagement with the world. Or in Borges' *Tlon, Uqar, Orbis Tertius*, the elaborate hoax that is a clandestine creation of notable scholars, philologists and geographers, *re-creating* an encyclopedia of a non-existent

planet. So *The Falls* assembles the knowledge, data, statistics of a strange and future world, which resembles nothing so much as our own. It is the map, the table, the catalogue, the rigidity of these forms, that make any sense to us.

The impulse to order the universe is a utopian one. Upon first examination, *The Falls* opens a utopian space of cohesion and principled system, but a closer reading reveals it to be, rather, a heterotopia. The distinction is one made by Foucault in his preface to *The Order of Things*:

*Utopias* afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names . . . This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.<sup>1</sup>

*The Falls* is disturbing precisely because, though it offers an isomorphic utopian vision of order amidst chaos, it cannot possibly contain the universe's immense variety of experience, the ineffable difference that is Other which resides outside itself. It may appear to unfold with an untroubled logic, but like our post-modern condition it scrambles madly to appropriate everything and anything, an incongruous morass of accumulative detail which threatens at every moment to shatter and disperse once again like Babel. And this is the transgression of non-narrative cinema itself, which intervenes and subverts the impulse towards order.

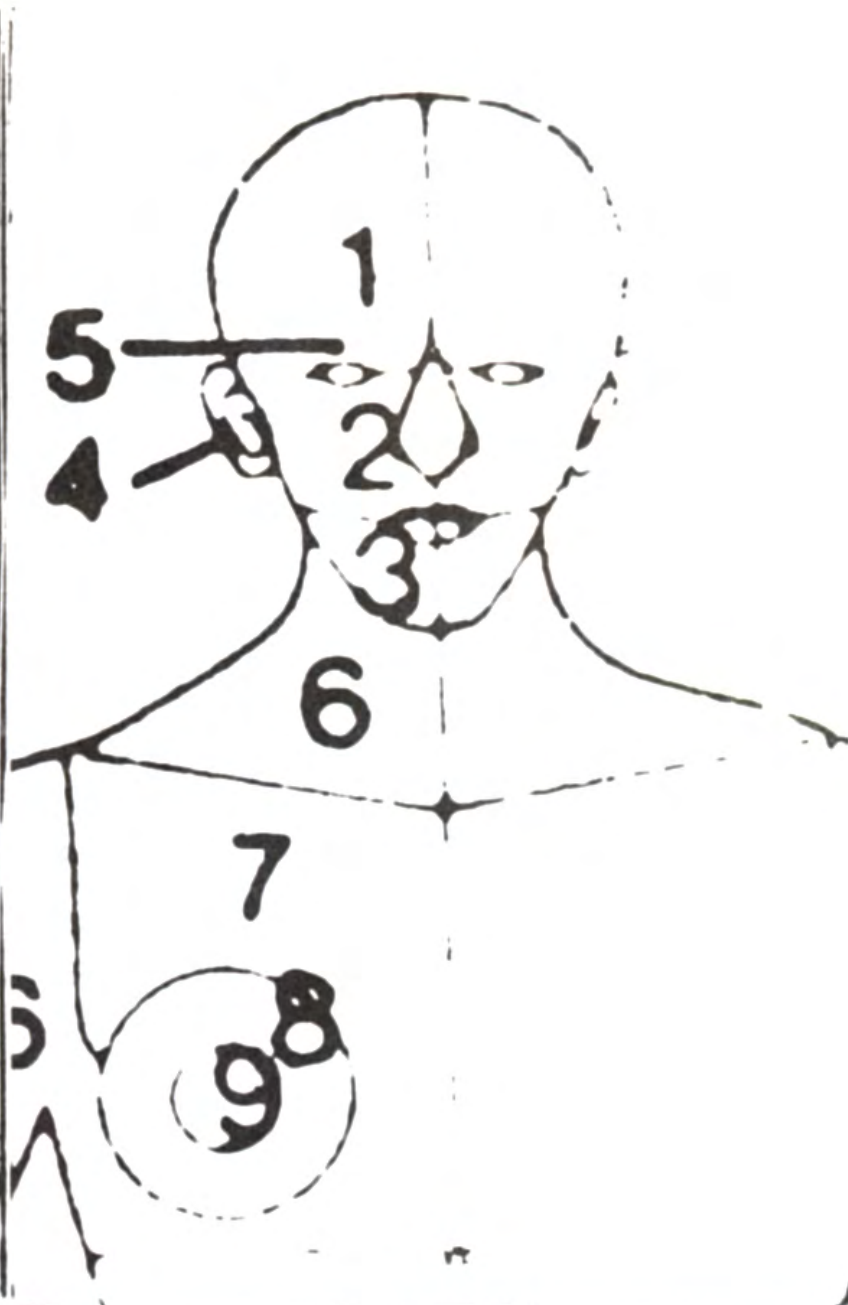
In his manifesto on experimental film, "The Cinema We Need," Bruce Elder argues that narrative is an obvious manifestation of this faulty, teleological notion of experience. In narrative "unmanageable ambiguities and the painful contradictions inherent in experience"<sup>2</sup> are eliminated. "Only in fictions," he writes echoing Borges, "can we be certain of anything."<sup>3</sup> Documentary is an especially insidious form, in this regard, which purports to "scientifically" classify phenomena under the sign of *Truth*. Elder suggests that the cinema we need would be heterotopian, allowing "for multiplicity and contradiction, since contraries are present in all experience."<sup>4</sup> It would threaten the will to mastery that characterizes our present bourgeois discourse, since it would not cover over gaps in knowledge. In a particularly striking invocation of Ezra Pound, Elder quotes *Canto XIII*:

And even I can remember  
A day when the historians left  
      blanks in their writings,  
I mean for things they didn't know

Greenaway's method of structuring the arbitrary is itself a self-reflexive commentary on the way voice-over functions in documentary to structure disparate images which, divorced from their aural context, signify nothing in and of themselves. To a limited extent, then, *The Falls* offers an alternative structure to the one it parodies. There are moments in the film of stunning visual splendour, rapid montages of archival footage and still photography, which are completely incongruous with the spoken text. They exist in a contrapun-

**OPPOSITE:** "What emerges in the course of the film . . . is an often poignant desire by the subjects themselves to deny and resist this totalitarian impulse towards classification."









"Like *The Falls*, (*nostalgia*) employs a disorientation between the various discourses of film."

tal relationship, and cannot be recuperated within the larger narrative schema and teleological imperative the film has constructed. Such a device calls into question the very artifice of documentary codes and, by implication, the falsity of all ordering systems.

In this way, *The Falls* recalls one of Greenaway's admitted influences, Hollis Frampton, and his (*nostalgia*). (*nostalgia*) is an autobiographical film, consisting of soundtrack descriptions of photographs which are seen in the film lying on top of electric coils which slowly burn the images away. The descriptions, though, are one photograph ahead of the screen image, leaving the first photograph undescribed and the last description without a corresponding image. There is a fallacious temptation to ascribe the final description to the first photograph (if one can even recall what it was) but this just proves how dependent we are on scientific bourgeois discourse, anxious to categorize, classify and explain even that which is ultimately discordant. There are other ambiguities in the film, most notably that the narrator's voice is that of Michael Snow, not of Frampton; largely because of this, we are led to doubt that there is any real connection between the spoken text and the screen image. Like *The Falls*, (*nostalgia*) employs a disorientation between the various discourses of the film, thus not allowing a rational, controlled "reading," the notion of which is a clear manifestation of the will to mastery.

In its textual excess, obsession with esoteric minutiae and ornithological gobbledegook, *The Falls* stands as a radical work which can be read as a meta-critique of this scientific

bourgeois discourse it employs. Its impulse, though parodic, is neither merely critical nor didactic and moralizing. It offers no redemptive vision outside of itself, that is, outside of aesthetic experience. It certainly does not pretend to replace the discourse it criticizes; instead, because it operates within the hegemony of such a discourse, subverts its very foundation. This is, of course, the strategy of all activist postmodern art, but Greenaway's film shies away from such intervention—its hermeticism does not open out onto the world, but is a meditation *on* that world from which it envisions no exit. It is an elegy to a dead world, with a sense of humour. □

#### NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York, 1970), p. xviii.
2. Bruce Elder, "The Cinema We Need," in *Canadian Forum* 746 (February, 1985), p. 33.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

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# Rosa Von Praunheim in Theory and Practice

by Bryan Bruce

A recent headline in the *Toronto Sun* urged the general public to "Put the Joy Back in Gay," the editorial it introduced decrying the appropriation of the word "gay" by homosexuals, and expressing bewilderment over a perfectly good english word having become a "synonym for sodomy." Aside from providing a typical (and laughable) example of dominant homophobia, this minor diatribe reveals how strategic the borrowing of a small, seemingly innocent word has become. The columnist is



Rosa Von Praunheim: "a kind of anachronistic fredhalstedian studied sexiness."







resentful that the word "gay" has been taken away from heterosexuals because "the people it describes are not gay" (how could they be if they are homosexual?); being 'gay' (in its original sense) is exactly what we're not supposed to be—perversion and deviance, according to the *Sun* columnist, anyway, is no laughing matter.

I've begun with this idea of gay strategy to introduce a discussion of the four films of Rosa Von Praunheim, the German experimental director, screened at The Inverted Image, Toronto's first annual gay film festival. Von Praunheim, like his fellow Berliner and 'underground' film-maker, Lothar Lambert, attempts to posit 'gayness' (that is, issues of humour, travesty, irony, satire, and so on) as a revolutionary concept, comedy, in its apparent innocence, becoming here, at least in theory, a means to unapologetic homosexual liberation. Particularly in his most recent work, *A Virus Knows No Morals*, a comic treatment of the AIDS phenomenon, Von Praunheim attempts to render the very notion of 'gayness' radical once more (long after gay culture has become sordidly apolitical and assimilated by the mainstream), a conscious strategy which, like many of his ideas, is theoretically sound, but confused and hysterical in execution, becoming, at times, manifestly reactionary.

In order to explore this unfortunate dislocation of theory and practice, then, I want first to identify the progressive and functional strategies Von Praunheim has developed, both in the conscious manufacturing of his 'persona' (the experimental film director as star) and in his aggressive critique of gay culture, a position which comes across most directly in his epic '70s documentary of the gay movement in America, *Army of Lovers/Revolt of the Perverts*; following this, an analysis of three of his fiction films coming after the documentary project (*City of Lost Souls*, 1983, *Horror Vacue: The Fear of Emptiness*, 1985, and *A Virus Knows No Morals*, 1986) will reveal a sensibility strangely inconsistent with his theoretical platform of the solidarity of women and gays as oppressed minorities, and the production of a strong, determined, and politically charged gay image detached from the limited and marginalized representation allowed by dominant cinema. Finally, a comparison of the

portrayal of homosexuality in the films of Von Praunheim and Lothar Lambert will demonstrate the importance of finding methods and images in cinema to work towards a new politicization of gay identity.

As a starting point for the examination of his 'persona,' Von Praunheim's position in the West German film community is highly significant. Although he aligns himself strongly with the more experimental and obscure German film-makers (Jean-Marie Straub, Alexander Kluge, Vlado Kristl) and strongly criticizes those whose work is more commercial and internationally recognized (Fassbinder, Herzog, Wenders), Von Praunheim has intentionally positioned himself somewhere between the two camps, both in his particular film idiom, and in the cultivation of his public image. His camera style, for example, has clearly evolved out of a sense of avant-garde film language (the obsessive use of the zoom, the hand-held camera, a preference for compositional imbalance and non-sequitural montage), but is also strongly grounded in a narrative tradition and an appeal to theatrical and comedic convention (particularly cabaret and burlesque) which automatically makes his films more accessible and playful, less impeded by the weight of avant-garde seriousness. He accuses the commercially successful directors, particularly Fassbinder, of being apolitical in order to gain a wider audience, but makes no attempt to conceal his own desire for fame, publicly playing out the superstar role with a vengeance. His contempt for Fassbinder and the Munich school comes out strongly in an article he wrote on the German film scene for *Films and Filming* in the early '70s: "... the 23 year old director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, with a group of foolish helpful actors, like Andy Warhol does, made his third big experimental film about the Fascism of himself and his friends. The film academy of Munich is of little relevance."<sup>1</sup> In retrospect, it seems ironic that it may well have been Fassbinder's subsequent superstardom that paved the way for the wider acceptance and distribution of other gay-oriented West German film-makers such as Werner Schroeter, Frank Ripploh, Lothar Lambert, Heinz Emigholz, and Von Praunheim himself.

Whereas the European director as international superstar phenomenon has, in one way or another, led to the undoing of the big three (Fassbinder's burn-out, Herzog's artistic failure, and Wenders' diluted and uninspired Hollywood period), Von Praunheim's star

status, although more marginal, particularly in North America, has become one of his greatest strengths, consciously manipulated, and used as a kind of ironic counterpoint to his artistic output, which remains, despite its accessibility, very much limited to the avant-garde circuit. As a political strategist whose project of gay activism is not restricted to its filmic expression, Von Praunheim recognizes the value of exploiting the media in order to access as wide an audience as possible, wider than his films could possibly reach. It is also his ability to articulate this persona to such strategic advantage that makes the failure of his recent films to achieve a viable and coherent politic all the more disturbing.

The construction of the Rosa Von Praunheim persona begins with the adoption by a gay man of a female pseudonym, designed as a means to both the undermining of gender intransigency, and a theoretical alignment of the gay and women's movements, which, he claims adamantly in his interviews, must be united to succeed. In opposition to this gesture toward female identification, Von Praunheim has cultivated a deliberately virile appearance, described in *In Touch*, an American gay softcore magazine, as "a kind of anachronistic fredhalstedian studied sexiness."<sup>2</sup> The phrase is apt in a double sense, evoking both his own media pose as a gay pornography star and the work behind its contrivance, each calculated signifier of masculinity aimed at disrupting the expectation set up by the female pseudonym for an effeminate gay male. The porno star image has been promoted by Von Praunheim in a variety of ways—posing nude in a German film magazine, being interviewed by pornographic publications, documenting his own sexual exploits in *Army in Lovers*—and is clearly intended to shock his audience, testing the tolerance of liberals who are sympathetic to gays as long as their sexual activity remains hidden and discreet, and challenging reticent gays to be more open and assertive. It is this strategy of maintaining a confident, aggressive, and unapologetically sexualized public image that is perhaps Von Praunheim's strongest contribution to the gay cause.

It is with *Army of Lovers/Revolt of the Perverts*, the director's highly personal account of the gay liberation movement, that the Von Praunheim persona finds its clearest expression. Shot in the US between 1971 and 1978 at a cost of \$40-thousand, the film documents every conceivable mode and organization of homosexuality—from lesbian separa-

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**OPPOSITE:** Above and below—Rosa Von Praunheim in *A Virus Knows No Morals*.



tists to NAMBLA and Boston's *Fag Rag* to various gay ethnic representatives—with Von Praunheim himself commenting on his experiences, or appearing intermittently as an inseparable part of the history he is recording and helping to create. It is particularly with his voice-over narration in this film that the film-maker attempts to establish his political agenda, telling us directly that he believes the private should become public for gays, or admitting that he had never liked lesbians before making the film, but has come to realize they are doubly oppressed, pointing to the obvious but often over-looked truism that, as one lesbian puts it, "gay men are as sexist as straight men." As in his fiction films, however, the evidence provided by the images often thoroughly contradicts the theory espoused. For example, while interviewing a radical lesbian feminist who criticizes gay men for expecting women either to play the nurturing mother role for them or conform to a camp aesthetic of beauty and victimization, Von Praunheim's contempt for the woman is scarcely concealed, suggesting that he has not quite overcome his distaste for gay women. It is at moments such as these that his adamantly masculinized position, although adopted with purpose, seems to achieve little distance from the gay male identity he attempts elsewhere to undermine.

The use of the masculine persona is much more successful when used for shock value through the hypersexualization of ordinary filmic situations. A section of the film with the gay porno movie star Fred "L.A. Plays Itself" Halsted ends with Von Praunheim about to give him a blow job, redefining, to put it mildly, the conventional relationship between the interviewer and the interviewed in documentary. The footage of Von Praunheim and his lover having (gay) sex (including a close-up of ejaculation), as filmed by his students for an SFU summer workshop, serves the same purpose, overturning, in a disturbingly real sexual context, staid notions of the institutionalized teaching of film production, a notoriously apolitical, if not blatantly reactionary, discipline as offered in many universities and colleges. This highly experimental approach to both film-making and education is, again, the most exciting aspect of the director's political stance.

Another important and somewhat shocking tactic of Von Praunheim is his aggressive attack on gay culture itself, particularly directed against its reformist and apologist elements, such as the National Gay Task Force in America,

although his critique extends to the prevalent sexism and racism found in the gay community at large. Through interviews with homosexual minorities, he exposes the disdain for difference held by gay white males who fail to recognize their own oppressed position, or conveniently reject those who might jeopardize their chances of being recognized by society as legitimate and 'normal' in spite of the unfortunate misadventure of their sexual affinities. Anyone who has witnessed the frightening homogeneity of the GWM bar scene in Toronto (enforced by strict dress codes, ranging from women being required to wear skirts to men's bars, presumably to exclude butch lesbians, to the rejection of cross-dressers in order to eliminate the feminized male, and other more subtle discriminatory policies) will understand that those who do not conform to the gay image borrowed from and approved by straight culture must remain in exile. Von Praunheim's strategy in *Army of Lovers* of giving a voice to as many gay minorities as possible is perhaps less a measure of a diluted pluralism within which a strong and unified gay identity becomes lost than an appeal to the acceptance of difference and an insistent visibility which maintains a stronger, more active opposition to dominant, heterosexual society. It is also consistent with his project of 'deghettoizing' gay culture (not only the geographical reality of bars, baths, and parks, but the whole marginalized consciousness that goes with it) in order to get past the extreme limitations imposed by the existing prevalent gay identity, and to form alignments and cross-overs with other subcultures and oppressed minorities.

Part of the greatest controversy surrounding *Army of Lovers* comes out of extending this 'pluralism' to include even the most fanatical, right wing gay minorities. Von Praunheim almost revels in the camp potential of these images, standing in front of the Nazi flag with the uniformed gay Nazi (who claims to be representatives of the gay community) as the camera zooms into the swastika, or filming the "tower of strength" parade float of the independent gay church with its self-appointed bishops and cardinals flaunting their Catholic drag. That the two groups are juxtaposed makes the obvious connection for us, allowing the absurdity of the images to unfold by itself; that Von Praunheim has included the material in his film at all speaks of the commitment of his project to make homosexuality a highly visible reality without suppressing even its most hideous manifestations.

Following these extreme images, Von Praunheim immediately gives us one of the more caustic headlines from Anita Bryant ("I'd rather my child be dead than homo"), making another connection with fascism and religious fanaticism. Earlier in the film we are encouraged to indulge in the campiness of Anita's Las Vegas style performance of "You Are My Lucky Star," followed by the famous footage of her getting a pie in the face from a gay man on national television. As with the inclusion of the defeat of the Senator John Briggs anti-gay teachers initiative, the triumph over homophobic public figures is satisfying to watch, providing a rallying point for gays. However, in the case of Anita Bryant (the best thing ever to happen to the gay movement, according to Von Praunheim), there is something disturbing about watching an auditorium full of gay males cheering and laughing as a female camp figure, made so partly by gays (witness Von Praunheim's use of the "Lucky Star" number), is defiled, shit upon. Of course she is reprehensible and ridiculous for equating homosexuals with murderers and thieves, but she is, after all, merely another victim of the dominant masculine discourse, and the spectacle of this degrading act perpetrated by a man on a woman, and the pleasure felt by the audience, belies a veiled misogyny which will become unambiguous in Von Praunheim's later work in a fictional mode.

Von Praunheim's three fiction films screened at the Inverted Image festival are almost homogenous enough in structure and sensibility to be considering a single work, each characterized by the 16mm format (also Lothar Lambert's medium), the improvisational quality, and the loosely connected scenes providing a pseudo-narrative impetus. *City of Lost Souls* and *A Virus Knows No Morals* both begin with the same convention of introducing the characters at the beginning before representing them in a narrative context, and, like *Army of Lovers*, make use of the singing chorus (men in drag) to comment on the action; all three films make obvious use of the same sets redecorated and rearranged, of theatrical props and backdrops, and of grotesque and shocking imagery plainly intended to offend. Von Praunheim's emphasis on process, allowing his actors to improvise and rehearse in workshop situations weeks before filming, and his ability to capture the reality of the characters behind their fictional alibi, is, again, an apparently interesting and productive methodology; however, the images produced by this experimental



approach are of dubious use to a project of gay activism, particularly in the treatment of women.

*A Virus Knows No Morals* is the most obvious example of this discrepancy. In the face of the sensationalized and alarmist rendering of AIDS by the media, it is, of course, important for someone to look at the whole phenomenon with a sense of humour. All three films, in fact, tend to use comedy very consciously as a way of dealing with the most severe and unpleasant aspects of membership in marginalized and oppressed subcultures. But for Von Praunheim, AIDS becomes a convenient metaphor for the expression of his moribund, almost necrophiliacal weltanschauung, and his perhaps unconscious misogyny.

During a discussion after the Toronto screening of *A Virus Knows No Morals*, a woman in the audience asked Von Praunheim why the three main female characters in his film were depicted as hysterical monsters, and to account for

this questionable portrayal of women. The audience, consisting mostly of gay men, seemed generally uneasy with and disgruntled by the very idea of the issue being raised, a perhaps typical response from the Toronto gay community. Von Praunheim became automatically defensive (belying his obvious guilt), claiming that the female performers, themselves, were largely responsible for their own roles, and, revealingly, that "gay men have the right to portray women this way," particularly their mothers, whose sons try so hard to please them, "... and all you get is shit." Certainly references in the film to AIDS as "a slobbering, crawling mother beast," or a character chanting "AIDS yields before us when the mother is a carcass" betray the director's 'unconscious' anxieties about mother figures, one of the more enduring gay clichés. Presumably it is Von Praunheim who decides what will remain in the film after the final cut; he is culpable for perpetuating this kind of image regardless

of the motivations of his female players, or the theory he believes he has adopted in opposition to gay male sexism directed against women.

Perhaps the most telling scene about women in the film is the failed sexual encounter between a gay man and a straight woman, the former confessing that "cunts are utterly strange to me," while the latter urges him to "imagine my breasts as a huge shaved scrotum." This attempt to masculinize the female, either by avoiding her biological specificity altogether or by superimposing over it a fantasy of male desire, is symptomatic of a sensibility particular to those gay men who exclude or revile women out of an insecurity with or resentment and repression of their own femininity. A similar impulse emerges in *City of Lost Souls* with the reference to transsexuals who have breasts and a penis as "the new woman." Rather than treating sexual difference and transsexualism as an opportunity to discard or transcend regressive sex roles, the

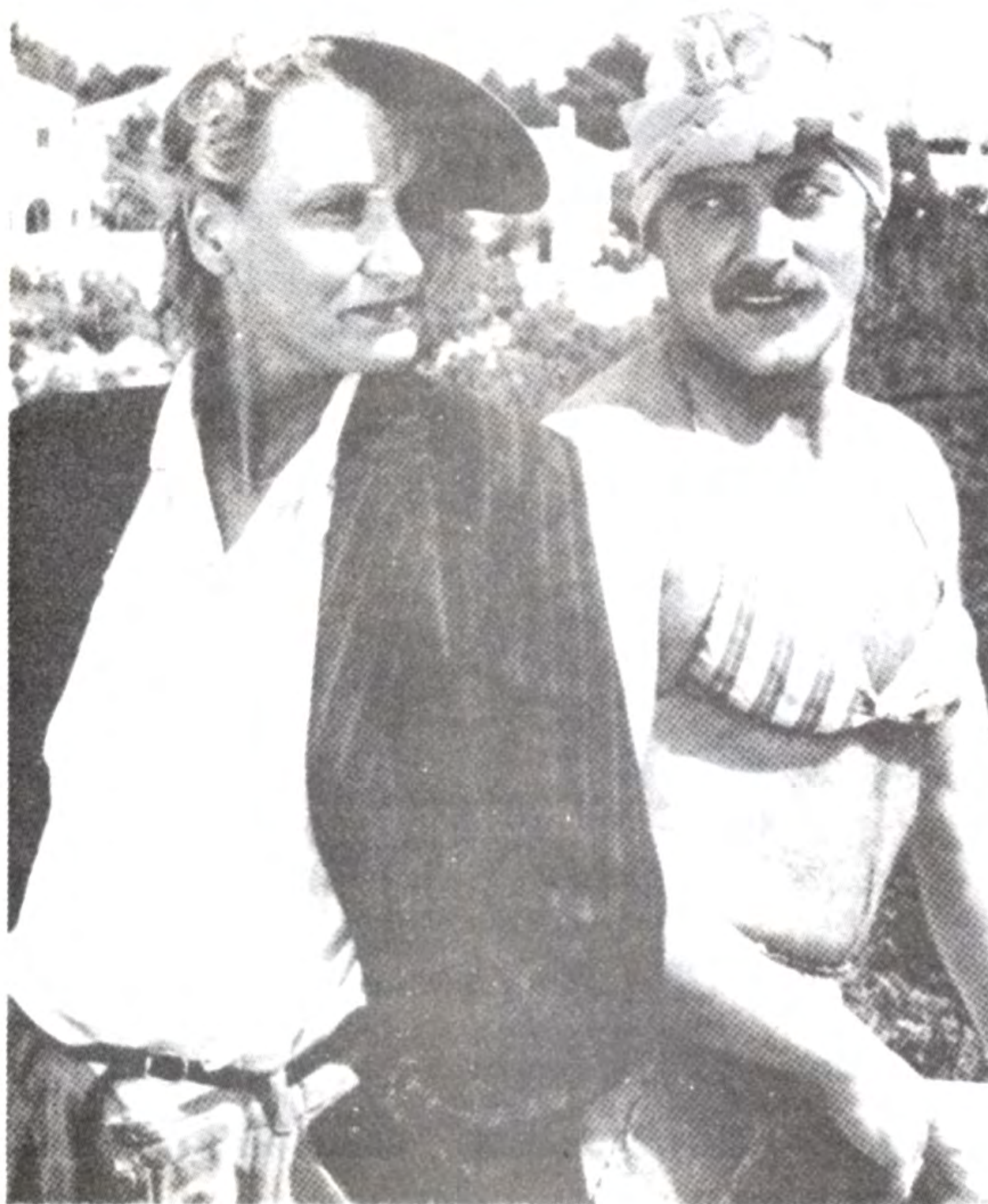


**A Virus Knows No Morals:** a necrophiliacal weltanschauung.





Ulrike S. in **Desert of Love** (above) and **Paso Doble** (below), with Stephen Menche.



assumption by these characters of a supposedly liberated female identity is nothing more than a reversion to the same camp aesthetic of the bitchy, sex-starved whore that has been insulting women since gay men resurrected Marilyn Monroe in the '70s. Warhol could get away with it in the '60s, but *City of Lost Souls*, Von Praunheim's '80s version of *Chelsea Girls*, does little to revolutionize cross-gender politics.

*Horror Vacui* and *City of Lost Souls* both present variations on Von Praunheim's tendency to masculinize the female, here in the form of inverted matriarchies. Each film contains matriarchs who are (or were) male (Angie Stardust, the transsexual who runs the hotel in *City of Lost Souls*; Madame C, the fascistic cult leader who turns out to be a male transvestite in *Horror Vacui*), suggesting, again, a reluctance to come to terms with the biologically female outside a male discourse. As with Von Praunheim's thinly veiled contempt for the lesbian separatist in *Army of Lovers*, it is a familiar male response, gay or otherwise, to be unwilling to accept, and treat with the utmost suspicion, any organization that excludes men entirely. It is also significant that *Horror Vacui* uses transvestism as a metaphor for the duplicity of fascism. Like the mother in *A Virus Knows No Morals* who spies on her son in the public washroom by dressing as a man and wearing a dildo (another instance of the masculinized woman), drag is used here for reactionary purposes, as in *City of Lost Souls*, having more to do with confusion and hysteria than an articulate attack on entrenched assumptions about gender.

A very general comparison of the work of Von Praunheim and Lothar Lambert points to the desirability of producing positive gay images, including a sensitivity to women's issues. There are some obvious affinities between the films of the two Berlin directors: both work loosely in an experimental narrative style, resulting in an uneven, episodic presentation; both deal with specific gay issues such as promiscuity (using parks, baths, etc. as locations), transvestism, transsexualism, sado-masochism, and other 'deviant' forms of sexual behaviour; both use comedy as a way of purging the repression and guilt which may result from alternative sexual practice. It is not, then, a difference in the kinds of subjects each looks at, or the degree to which these become extreme and disturbing, but rather a question of how they are articulated, and the motive behind the approach.

A common theme in the work of both



film-makers, for example, is the position of exile many gays are forced into, and coping with that reality. Whereas Von Praunheim tends towards images of fragmentation, disintegration, and decay to depict this marginalization (the fire at the end of *City of Lost Souls*; the cancer and disease imagery in *Horror Vacui* and *A Virus Knows No Morals*), Lambert emphasizes solidarity in the face of it, particularly with women. The exuberant dance of the newly liberated wife (Ulrike S.) with her now gay husband (Stephan Menche) that closes Lambert's *Paso Doble* is a perfect expression of this kind of mutual support. Lambert has also found in Ulrike S., the central figure of both *Fraulein Berlin* and his latest film, *Desert of Love*, a female alter ego who allows him to express comfortably his own femininity while presenting a strong, confident (and unproblematically bisexual) female character in her own right. No such attempt to consolidate the gay and women's movements exists in the recent work of Von Praunheim.

Whereas Von Praunheim limits his presentation of gay exile to a claustrophobic, oppressive consciousness, Lambert grabs hold of the underdog position and exploits it to full advan-

tage. His approach to film-making itself, characterized by using his weaknesses as his greatest strengths, exemplifies this attitude. For *Fraulein Berlin*, a film, like most of Lambert's work, not shot in synch sound, a sequence filmed at a rather stuffy Festival of Festivals party at Norman Jewison's posh home is transformed, by the post-dubbed soundtrack, into a scathing and very funny critique of the barrier between 'legitimate' film-making circles and Lambert's underworld, with Ulrike S., in the director's fictionalization of the event, getting propositioned for a dirty movie role by Jewison. *Desert of Love* is built entirely around the real disaster of having most of the original footage for the film accidentally destroyed at the lab. Not to be defeated, Lambert shoots additional scenes of the major characters commenting on the salvaged rushes in the editing room, resulting in a film that manages to critique itself and foreground its own shortcomings without losing its sense of humour. It is this ability of Lambert to step back and look at his process and position within gay culture, laughing at it when necessary, that most distinguishes him from Von Praunheim.

It should be said, in closing, that

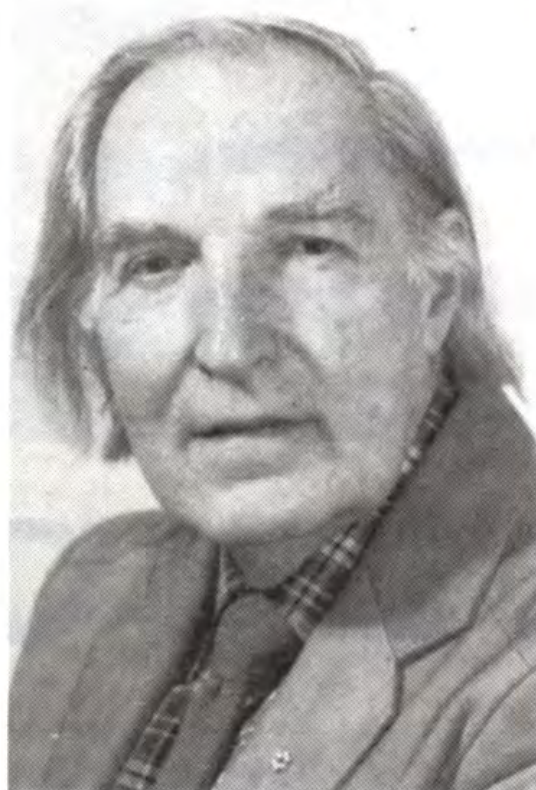
Rosa Von Praunheim, a very prolific film-maker, has a whole body of work (35 films previous to *Army of Lovers*) that I have not had access to, and my analysis has been based on the impressions I got from only his most recent work. It should also be acknowledged that the whole impetus behind his work is to create a polemic to reactivate an apathetic and apolitical gay culture which has largely lost its focus, a project for which he is to be commended. It's only unfortunate that behind the controversial stance lies a confused and desolate subtext that contradicts the more positive aspects of his political initiative. Von Praunheim has recognized in theory the necessity of uniting the gay and lesbian movement with the more general women's movement; unhappily, his recent films, at any rate, have not lived up to his ideals. □

## ENDNOTES

1. *Films and filming*, vol. 16, no. 8, May 1970, p. 89.
2. *In Touch*, no. 40, Mar./Apr. 1979, p. 61.



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Colin Campbell as the **Woman From Malibu**.



# COLIN CAMP





by Kathleen Maitland-Carter

*Kathleen Maitland-Carter was joined for this interview by Toronto film-maker Bruce LaBruce.*

**KATHLEEN MAITLAND-CARTER:** *So I thought we'd begin by finding out about your background. I know that you paint, but I'm not sure if you painted first and then got into video—I guess we're focusing more on your video than on your performance . . .*

**COLIN CAMPBELL:** Yeah, right. I was a sculptor for 10 years and then started making video tape in, god, when was it? 1972, and, uh—what kind of information do you want?

**KM-C:** *Well, it just seems your early tapes such as Janus are more, I guess, sculptural.*

**CC:** Okay. At the time I started doing video, it had just started to be used, primarily by sculptors, and it was used in its original format as an extension of body art and installation, so a lot of sculptors did start to use video, and then most of them didn't stay with the medium, most went on to conceptual art and that kind of thing. But I stayed. So my early pieces are quite sculptural, very formal.

**KM-C:** *How did the transformation come about, of doing more sculptural work to incorporating narrative?*

**CC:** Yeah. The first five or six pieces are very formal, and then I did a piece, while I was teaching art at Mount Allison in New Brunswick, which was where I started doing video, called, um, *Art Star*. And it was basically a rant about how awful Mount Allison was and what it was like to live in Sackville. So that was the first sort of narrative piece I did. That was the first time I spoke. And that was also the first tape I ever exhibited. So from there up until 1977 I did work that was mostly autobiographical, or focused on how I was interacting with the world. Then in '77 I went to California and did the *Woman From Malibu* series, and that was the first really scripted material I did where I impersonated another person altogether and turned the camera away from me completely and I started dealing with external fiction as opposed to internal fiction.

**BRUCE LABRUC:** *Your work obviously has a lot of affinities with film—not only the narrative stuff you do, but the appeal to melodrama and the signifiers of “women’s pic-*

**CC:** Okay, that's two questions.

**BLaB:** *Yeah.* [giggle]

**CC:** The *Woman From Malibu* series is a total of 90 minutes, but I think it's still more easily identified with art practice as opposed to film-making, simply because its structure is too quirky to be viewed in terms of film practice. But the later work, the work I've done in the '80s, for sure is much more filmic. I'm getting back to much longer pieces again, and as far as I'm concerned the piece I'm just editing now could have been shot in film. It could be a film. It's quite long, about 60 minutes. But why don't I work in film? I can't afford it. It's really simple. I'm sure you know better than me the problems for independent film-makers. So for practical reasons I continue to work in video.

**KM-C:** *Film is very expensive, but with independent film-makers—feminist, lesbian and gay film-makers, black and Asian film-makers—they find their community, and there are international circuits set up through events like festivals. So there is a lot of interesting film work being done. I think the difference with video is that the advent of video technology—porta-packs and so on—made it much more available to artists and cultural workers when it came about in the late '60s, early '70s, so it seems to have developed a stronger, more cohesive community. And because video is so recent, there's a lot of women working in it as well, that's why it has a strong feminist tradition. Whereas film has a kind of troubled history, especially 'avant-garde' cinema, because it's come out of a more formalist, masculinist tradition.*

**BLaB:** *Well, the whole 'industry' stigma around film, in which the more careerist, aggressive ones make it, can access it a lot more easily, seems to be more geared to a masculine discourse.*

**CC:** Yeah, I would agree.

**KM-C:** *Which is something that your video work undercuts. I wanted to relate all this to your work with drag. It seems a lot of portrayals of women by male transvestites are really misogynist. I think your work escapes that.*

**CC:** Uh-huh.

**KM-C:** *Have you been accused of . . .*

**CC:** Misogyny? No. Well, let me see, the first time I did drag was in the *Woman From Malibu*. I was actually going

# PBELL INTERVIEWED

tures.” *There's also a move away, in your work, from an 'art'-based focus to something maybe broader, less esoteric . . .*

**CC:** Are you talking about the recent work?

**BLaB:** *The progression from your other kind of formalist work to more accessible work with dramatic monologues and melodramatic elements. You could almost identify some of your video work as one long melodrama—the Woman From Malibu series or the Modern Love series, looked at as a whole, are like one long movie or something.*

**CC:** Yeah, well I mean, yeah.

**BLaB:** *And I just want to ask about that and also why you don't work specifically in film, why you've chosen video.*

to try and find somebody to play the part and then I decided I could probably do the material best if I did it myself, so I went to the Salvation Army and I bought the wig and the clothes and jewellery and everything . . .

**BLaB:** *Was that traumatic?* [Ha ha ha]

**CC:** No, not really. They probably thought I was going to rob a bank. Anyway, I dressed up and did her, and I thought it was just going to be the first 10-minute piece, but it turned out, for me, she was a really good vehicle to discuss the culture of Southern California.

**BLaB:** *This is when you were living . . .*

**CC:** Yeah, in L.A. So she sort of took over for the nine



months I was there (mostly doing research and then shooting the tapes). I never tried to actually disguise the fact that it was me or that it was a man, like, I kept my same voice. I mean I tried to keep her fairly neutral and not campy, actually, because it never occurred to me. I knew that might be an aspect of it, but it never seemed to enter the material itself. I premiered the work in Victoria and I was extraordinarily nervous because suddenly, it's that kind of naivety, you make a couple of tapes, you think they're fine, then you forget you're going to have to, like, show them and be there. Show and tell. So I was quite anxious about it, but the students were extremely positive and there just didn't seem to be any question about it being misogynist. So I don't think it is, I don't think the *Woman From Malibu* is misogynist, nor do I think Robin is, nor Anna in *Dangling By Their Mouths*. But I mean, the question has come up, Do you think it's misogynist?

**KM-C:** *No, I don't think it is. I think why it escapes being camp and why it's not misogynist are interlinked, you know, what Susan Sontag wrote about camp, that the characters are never developed in it, more, I guess, iconic or fetishized, whereas your characters are really developed.*

**BLaB:** *I think the fact that you do use a neutral, masculine voice really is part of that. It puts you in the position, when you're watching it, where you almost have no gender affiliation.*

**CC:** Yeah, it's also not really sexual. I mean, again, it's neutral, but there is no sexual interplay generally. My concern with all that material is about gender anyway, and stereotypical roles, and trying to address that as being a serious problem. I've never felt comfortable in any specific role in terms of sexuality or gender that I've been exposed to, which is why my work addresses that all the time.

**BLaB:** *In her "Video in Drag" article in Parallelogramme,<sup>1</sup> Dot Tuer says that "Colin Campbell chooses to construct the feminine by banishing the masculine." She was referring to No Voice Over. What do you think about that? Do you think that masculinity is unredeemable in your tapes?*

**CC:** No, although I think what Dot wrote about *No Voice Over* is very accurate in the sense that I was trying to set up a situation where the communication between women is quite extraordinary, a kind of communication that is mistrusted by men because they don't experience it themselves. Especially straight men. I guess I was trying to illustrate that my observation of women being able to express themselves to each other is always critiqued and under attack by men, and in the tape, Dix-10, who's mostly the voice off camera, his only way of dealing with, say, Mocha's premonition about Miranda's possible death, is to think she's gone crazy, or that she's hysterical, and he, in fact, undermines their ability to communicate what is really going on. So at the



No Voice Over



end of the tape it is not quite clear whether they've got it back together or whether he actually has split their form of communication so that they stop paying attention and Miranda does get on the plane and does get killed. I guess it's a somewhat veiled attack on white hetero-male dominance in society. What I was trying to do more was to show an alternative that I find very strong and important and meaningful, which is the relationship between women.

**BLaB:** *Like in Charlie's Angels. Someone brought up that connection, where Dix-10 is like . . .*

**KM-C:** . . . *Charlie.* [laughs]

**CC:** I didn't think of that until after I saw the tape for the first time.

**BLaB:** *I think Charlie's Angels is pretty amazing, situated as it is in the '70s and the way that pop culture identified feminism . . .*

**KM-C:** *Women with guns.*

**BLaB:** *Yeah! Did you like the show?*

**CC:** I've probably never watched it. I don't watch TV too much. But I think the major difference between my tape and *Charlie's Angels* is that my characters never really seem to be in the male's employ. They only work for him if they need the money, and I always have the sense that they can and do say no.

**KM-C:** *It seems there's a transformation in the kinds of characters that you've developed, from the Woman From Malibu character, a lower middle class, California kind of ladies' auxilliary housewife, and Robin in Modern Love, who's a kind of suburban, also lower middle class xeroxer, to the women in your most recent tape, I mean, the class difference is really evident. Why did you choose to start using these kinds of characters?*

**CC:** Because I think they're richer, there's more to do with them. I mean, the thing about Robin is she can't improve, I can't send her to University, kind of thing, you know . . .

**KM-C:** *You sent her on CUSO.*

**CC:** That was impressive—good scam while it lasted. But generally, I can't see her changing very much. That's part of her charm, but in *No Voice Over* there's much more to deal with, the characters are capable of consciously exploring issues as opposed to Robin, who stumbles into them.

**BLaB:** *Mmm. Although there is the appeal of accessibility of the middle tapes. I mean, I can see them being played in a lot of venues besides art venues. I think it's a shame they can't be viewed more broadly, because, you know, they have that kind of appeal.*

**CC:** Yeah, well *Bad Girls* was made specifically for the Cabana Room (the bar in the Spadina Hotel); that was my idea of trying to break out of the art ghetto. It was shown every week. I shot a sequence and edited it and dubbed it and then showed it on the weekend, I think that went on for about seven weeks. And it was great because it really was a different audience, I mean, it was sort of an art bar, but there was a lot of musicians and others as well. So my audience really changed at that point, an attempt to get out of the gallery situation for one night only, precious one night stand thing, into a much looser environment that was more fun. And it was also to try to get rid of the notion that video tape by artists was boring and dry and had no humour and couldn't deal with anything except 'high art.'



Fly, Robin, Fly: Colin Campbell as Robin in *Modern Love*.

**KM-C:** *So how self-consciously do you employ humour? Does it just seep in or is it a kind of strategy in some way?*

**CC:** Yeah, it's a strategy. It's one way to make your characters sympathetic, especially if they can laugh at themselves. It's also a good way to get some kinds of information across that might be just too heavy if you did it straight.

**KM-C:** *It's a tactic used by mainstream, dominant film and television, to employ humour to conceal its ideology, like Police Academy, for example, or Porky's. It's usually really misogynist . . .*

**CC:** Right.

**KM-C:** *And I find when you start criticizing that, people say "oh, don't be such a stick in the mud, it's just funny," they dismiss it. In a sense, you're kind of employing that strategy.* [laughs]

**CC:** The Porky's strategy. [laughs]

**KM-C:** *It seems very revealing, talking about gender, anyway, it allows the character to be sympathetic where some people might have problems dealing with that concept otherwise, about men dressed as women, or identifying with women.*

**BLaB:** *But it doesn't always work, like Kathleen was saying about camp earlier, which I think your tape Bennies From Heaven is guilty of. For me, it's your least successful tape, and that's partly because there isn't the character development of the other tapes.*

**CC:** Yeah, that tape is a real throw-away. The only thing I would say about it is that it was a reaction against the preponderance and insistence upon high tech and high finish tapes that look like they should be on television. I guess I did it to remind myself, as much as anyone else, that you







can be very loose with video still and do whatever you want as sloppily as you want, that there's still a place for that.

**KM-C:** *It seems there's less room now for a kind of low tech or sloppiness—with all the younger video artists there's this real insistence on "broadcast quality." Your last tape also had higher production values than your previous ones.*

**CC:** Yeah, although nothing much really changed in terms of equipment or technology between *No Voice Over* and other work I produced. It's all produced on VHS (½" tape) except for *White Money* and *The Woman Who Went Too Far*, which had a better camera. But I really think it depends on the piece. *No Voice Over* had to be done that way or it wouldn't work. But I know that people nearly faint when they see a glitch or some drop-out on the tape. It's like, I never see it, I don't care.

**KM-C:** *It seems really unfortunate. It seems like almost a rejection of the history of video art, I mean, something about video that I find so appealing is its opposition to other kinds of media and television, which used to be more evident in video production. It seems people are now going back to embracing narrative conventions.*

**BLaB:** *Well, Colin, this interview is for the comedy issue of Cine-Action!, so maybe you should tell some jokes or be funny.*

**CC:** Why did you choose me for the comedy issue?

**BLaB:** *Well, the thing I like most about your tapes is that a lot of the work is pure comedy coming from a comic tradition, like, from Jerry Lewis to Lothar Lambert, or whatever. I don't know, just very broad farce or deadpan techniques which are classic and it all seems to work very well in your tapes, whereas it seems very forced in other tapes I've seen, or comedy as a device that is very much signified as a device rather than being natural or spontaneous.*

**CC:** Yeah, well I think Robin was a perfect vehicle for comedy because in fact she never knew anything was funny, she never gets any of the jokes. She sees herself as dead serious and upwardly mobile and having a possible career in show business. What would happen, I thought, if you devised a character who took it all seriously? It would point out in a funny way what people were taking far too seriously. The same thing applies to *Woman From Malibu*, although I don't think that she's a laugh riot or anything, I mean, she's actually quite tragic, but there's always that edge, that she's going to veer into something potentially very funny. Like when she almost runs over Liza Minnelli but she doesn't know that that's funny.

**BLaB:** *Well, even when it's not purely comedic, like the dramatic monologue that opens one of the Woman From Malibu tapes about her husband being killed, I mean, that's played straight, but it's still funny.*

**CC:** Yeah, it's very eccentric. That's a verbatim quote from the *LA Times*—I remember reading it and thinking, "this is so weird." I think she gave the interview when she was extremely traumatized from the event, but it seemed so strange that she knew that her husband fell 19,000 feet to a 31,000 foot level [laughter], a weird kind of detailing about a horrific story, and it was possible to use that kind of detailing to point out all the peculiarities of Southern Californian culture, where she takes it seriously but to the audience it seems really funny.

**OPPOSITE: Modern Love**

**KM-C:** *In Shango Botanico, when the same character is in the motorhome with Lisa Steele's character watching the Rose Bowl parade out the window and on television simultaneously, I thought that obviously functioned in the same way. I think there are problems with that one, though. In a certain sense it could be read as classist, just that we comfortably watch and laugh at them from a video viewing room or gallery.*

**CC:** Well, that's the sort of oddball tape in that series. It doesn't develop the way the other pieces do. It's like a prolonged moment. But we did go to the Rose Bowl parade, that's how we got the audio sound, and people actually do park their RVs facing the parade route. [laughter] They're there three months before the parade because you have to be if you want to get that good parking spot, and they look out their windows, sipping their coffee, obviously watching it on TV to see what's going to be coming next.

**BLaB:** *I think that tape and the Robin tapes escape what maybe Lisa Steele's The Gloria Tapes doesn't. I like it on a certain level, but it seems to take a more condescending position towards that character.*

**KM-C:** *Really? I didn't find that at all.*

**BLaB:** *Well, that's my feeling anyway, that she was critiquing something about the position of that character and how she was down-trodden by different male figures and so on, but at the same time she was made into an intensely irritating character.*

**KM-C:** *Really? I like her character.*

**CC:** I like Gloria, but those tapes of course are coming from a much different kind of situation, where Lisa, at that time and for a number of years, worked at Interval House, which is a home for battered women and children, so it was kind of natural, I think, that the continuous experience of her work—that was how she made her living—did spill out finally into her tapes. I think probably what you're saying is one feels that Gloria always remains tragic and is never quite able to lift out of her situation, and the consequences are deeply wounding.

**BLaB:** *Yeah, maybe that has something to do with it.*

**CC:** It's ultimately much more serious, the consequences.

**BLaB:** *Yeah, whereas when you see Robin standing on the street corner with her umbrella waiting for a bus while "Fly,*

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#### Woman From Malibu





*Robin, Fly," the disco song, plays on the soundtrack, it's more tragi-comic.*

**CC:** Because Robin will never probably really be harmed, she's always going to spring back. Because she's curious, you know, but she's finally not engaged in what's going on around her. The consequences are never that deep—she just sort of goes on to the next thing.

**BLaB:** *Yeah, parties through life.* [laughter] *Now, I wanted to ask you some questions about personal experiences that might provide a background for your work, like, if you've ever had any experiences being attacked by people because of your sexuality? You know, queer-bashing. I don't even know if you're gay, specifically, but it's almost not an issue, in terms of gender, for being attacked for those kinds of things.*

**CC:** I'm bisexual. It's a peculiar position to occupy in one's life because you get it from both sides. It's certainly been the basis for a lot of my work—the gender blurring and the cross-dressing, the mix up and rejection of commitment to gender roles. Actually, there was one incident—I do remember once walking on the street with my son, who was about 13 at the time, and we met on the sidewalk two gay men coming towards us, and as they passed, I heard them say, "Oh, he's into chicken," and I was really offended because it seemed that, regardless of which community one acts in, whether I pass as heterosexual or gay (as you know, there is no bisexual society, it's just not acknowledged), regardless of which camp I'm in, I'm criticized by the other one automatically. Or in that case they assumed I was gay, and that I couldn't possibly be a father, therefore my son must be some kid that I picked up. So that's why I made *He's A Growing Boy/She's Turning 40*—I don't know if you've seen the tape . . .

**KM-C & BLaB:** *Yeah.*

**CC:** . . . where I'm trying once again to deal with homophobia, and in some cases, homophobia within the homosexual community. I find a lot within the gay community extremely conservative, and it has interfered with my work, like my tape, *White Money*. I was trying to give representation to taboo images, things that we're not allowed to see—like men fucking or women doing S and M. I mean, you go to the movies all the time and you're constantly watching heterosexuals making out, but until recently, you never see gay men, or you would see women having sex with each other but always from the male point of view. So I made that tape to challenge that fact, to give voice to a different kind of imagery. The tape was curated into a show in Ottawa, and the person at the gallery insisted that the tape come out, and he was gay. He said that it was a shoddy way to represent sex between men and the tape was withdrawn because of that.

**BLaB:** *Did you take him up on it?*

**CC:** Yes and no. I mean, I got my fee. I'm not sure what his position really was—he was really anxious about the fact of gay sex being on a tape in his gallery even though he was gay. The other thing was the censorship issue, where I think he was afraid the police we're going to come down on him.

**KM-C:** *Prior censorship.*

**CC:** Exactly. And my position on censorship is well known.

**BLaB:** *Yeah, your tape Snip Snip. How did you feel about playing Mary Brown? Because I think your drag is usually so*

*sympathetic that you almost make Mary Brown sympathetic—which is a Herculean task. What kind of response did get from that tape?*

**CC:** Well, that was fun to do. Again, it was almost like the *Bennies* tape, in a way.

**BLaB:** *Oh, I think it's much more successful.*

**CC:** Yeah? I haven't seen it for a long time.

**BLaB:** *It's really funny.*

**CC:** Oh, good. I forgot about that tape. Well, that's a collaborative tape between myself and Rodney Werden.

**BLaB:** *The very concept of putting Mary Brown in a position of drag just works automatically because it would be so horrifying to her.*

**CC:** The funny thing was when we made that tape and it was shown at the Festival of Festivals, most of the audience didn't know who I was playing, they didn't know what Mary Brown looked like. So I always thought the tape never worked.

**KM-C:** *I thought it was a great characterization.*

**CC:** I guess she became well known after that.

**BLaB:** *Yeah, she was very high profile.*

**CC:** At that time she insisted that her photograph couldn't be used in the newspapers because the press took such unflattering photographs of her. So she censored her image from the papers. They weren't allowed to photograph her.

**BLaB:** *She became a real star.* [laugh] *She knew what she was doing.*

**KM-C:** *Then there's a character based on John Bentley-Mays played by a woman (Marian Lewis) that works well too, I think. It undercuts just reducing it all to this vicious matriarch which you see in so many films, that with women in positions of power or authority, their sex is always highlighted as one of the causes.*

**BLaB:** *Have you met with any other kinds of resistance from the gay community?*

**CC:** Not specifically, but I don't find that the gay community actually comes out and supports very actively any of the gay artists working in video.

**KM-C:** *Not even for John Greyson?*

**CC:** No, I mean, it's more the politically conscious groups. But I know a real frustration of John's is that his work isn't seen by the gay community at large. It's really a drag because I can't think of anybody who works harder for the gay community. And again, I think with John's work, like his last couple of tapes, which have had very explicit sexual material in them, it seems like that really makes the gay community nervous, that they don't want that kind of trouble.

**BLaB:** *Mmm-hmm.*

**CC:** I have to say that it's not a blanket condemnation. Some members do support gay artists, but I don't see it.

## NOTES

1. Dot Tuer, "Video in Drag: Trans-sexing the Feminine," *Parallelogramme*, vol. 12, no. 3, Feb.-March 1987, p. 24.



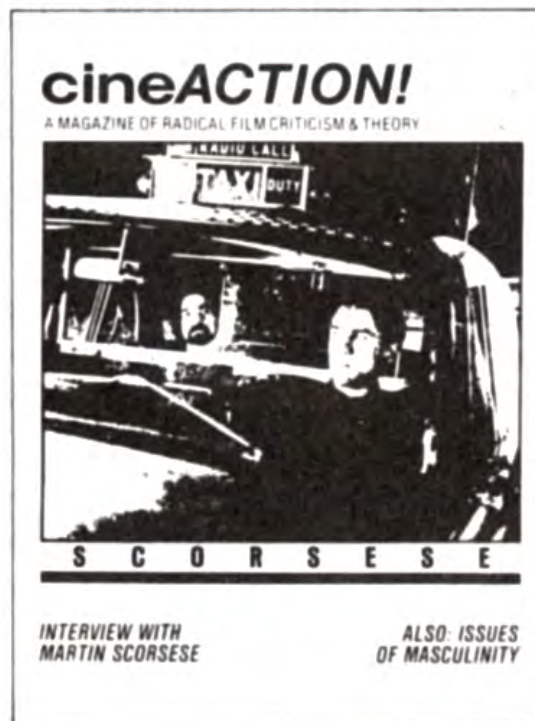
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# The Studio with the Team Spirit: A Look at Ealing Comedies

by Marc Glassman  
& Judy Wolfe

**C**ONSIDER THESE THREE scenarios.

A misfit scientist dedicates himself to the creation of the perfect fibre. He claims that his dream cloth would "never get dirty and never wear out." After numerous dangerous experiments, he succeeds in his endeavours. When he tries to announce his noble achievement, however, he discovers another truth: both labour and capital view his creation as a monster that will destroy their livelihoods, and they unite to halt *The Man in the White Suit*.<sup>1</sup>

A fussy, middle-aged bank clerk and his rooming-house neighbour, a souvenir manufacturer, conspire to pull off the biggest heist in history. The *Lavender Hill Mob*'s plan is absurdly simple: once they steal the truck that carries bullion to the Bank—the truck in which the clerk rides every day—they intend to melt the gold down into miniature Eiffel Towers, which will be exported to Paris for sale. Unfortunately for them, a group of British schoolgirls purchases a mistakenly opened consignment. Upon her return to England, one of the girls presents the souvenir to her Adonis—a policeman.<sup>2</sup>

The distant heir to the Dukedom of Chalfont determines that he must avenge the wrongs done to his mother by her family, wrongs which reduced her to humiliating poverty and him to the role of shop clerk. He decides that the only proper thing for him to do is to eliminate all the members of his aristocratic family who stand in the way of his rightful destiny. While pursuing his coolly murderous route, he is reminded by one of his relatives of the poetry of Lord Tennyson. The progress of this pilgrim is deliciously skewed: he only pretends to have a *Kind Heart* in his pursuit of a *Coronet*.<sup>3</sup>

Although these could easily be the plots of a series of another popular '50s genre, the film noir, they are in fact the scenarios of some of the most successful

comedies of the period, those produced at Ealing Studios.

Ealing Comedies have been ignored by a generation of critics, perhaps because they do not fit the mold created by the auteur theory, perhaps because Charles Barr's book, *Ealing Studios* (Cameron & Tayleur, 1977), is definitive. In either case, a reconsideration of the success of the films in the light of contemporary critical approaches concerning genre, and psychological, textual and sociological elements, seems in order.

This paper examines three of the greatest Ealing Comedies, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, and *The Man in the White Suit*. The films epitomize the Ealing style, which in a cool, literate manner depicted the perilous progress of recognizable British people obsessed with notions of achievement and perfectability. These characters have dreams that they are willing to sacrifice everything to achieve. Although their tonalities range in shade from gray to black, they are inevitably comedies of failure. They are representative of what was happening to Britain at the same time, in a country that had just been on the winning side of a major war but that was left in economic ruin while it watched its erstwhile enemies rise from the ashes on the wings of the Marshall Plan. While the atmosphere of the comedies is cold and ironic, the submerged emotions, with their social and political ramifications, are among the most subversive elements within the narrative structures common to all three of the Ealing Comedies addressed here.

Ealing Studios existed as a film producing unit in a critical period of British history, from the mid-1930s through to the late 1950s. During that time, Great Britain went from a depression-bound society, through the horrors and heroism of the Second World War, to a gray post-War period of declining imperial prestige and a deepening crisis in the class system. Through their programme of melodramas, romances, comedies and war adventure films, Ealing strove to reflect the scope and diversity of the British people during those tumultuous years.

For over a decade and a half, the Studio was phenomenally successful at doing this, producing numerous hits including the first Australian "Western," *The Overlanders* (1946); the most authentic police procedural, *The Blue Lamp* (1950); the first major British World War II film, *Convoy* (1940); and the most stylish of fantasies, *Dead of Night* (1945). Disdaining the tendencies of other producers such as J. Arthur Rank and Alexander Korda to produce "prestige" films that did not relate to the condition of the British people of the period, Ealing's boss, Michael Balcon, self-consciously maintained a nearly-documentarian fascination with the lives of the ordinary folk of England. When Ealing eventually collapsed after 1955, Balcon was asked by the BBC to provide the inscription for a plaque on the cornerstone of the main building. His words read: "Here during a quarter of a century many films were made projecting Britain and the British character."<sup>4</sup>

Balcon and Ealing deliberately courted the British public and to a large extent their ability to comprehend the nature of the British character can be judged by the acclaim with which such comedies as *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *The Man in the White Suit* were greeted upon their initial release. Balcon's desire to record the pulse beat of Britain is reflected in his hiring of such graduates of John Grierson's documentary team as Harry Watt (*Night Mail* [1936], *The Overlanders*) and Alberto Cavalcanti (*Pett and Pott* [1934], *Went the Day Well?* [1942]). It seems fitting that the ultimate expression of a people—their humour—should be the criterion by which the success of Balcon's project is judged. It is no joke of critical history that Ealing Studios has become identified with the genre designation: Ealing Comedy.

From *Hue and Cry* (1947) through to *The Ladykillers* (1955), the Studio released nine films that were applauded in Britain and abroad for their witty characterizations of eccentric individuals scheming to better themselves under difficult circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Several careers were launched as a result of the success surrounding the comedies. Alec Guinness

**OPPOSITE:** Alec Guinness on the set of *The Lavender Hill Mob*.



went from his *tour de force* portrayal of a multitude of d'Ascoynes in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* to successes in *The Man in the White Suit*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, *The Ladykillers* (all for Ealing), and won an Oscar for *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). T.E.B. Clarke, scenarist for *Hue and Cry*, which set the tone for the Ealing treatment, saw his wry populist sensibility rewarded with his own Oscar for *The Lavender Hill Mob*. Of the directors, Robert Hamer (*Kind Hearts and Coronets*) and Alexander Mackendrick (*Whiskey Galore*, *Man in the White Suit*, *Ladykillers*) have been accorded a certain reputation for their achievements during this period.

Yet, with the exception of Guinness, lasting recognition was never given to the artists at Ealing Studios. Neither auteurs nor hacks, the craftsmen who toiled for Ealing did not create works that could be analysed in a modish vein. Apart from the argument launched by Charles Barr, that the whole company existed to create its own "auteurist" form of representation (in which he claims that the films present "a consistent communal viewpoint"),<sup>6</sup> few important critics have bothered to consider the atmosphere in which these films were created.

Ealing was a physically small studio, run with the sort of benevolent paternalism that one associates with the liberal England of the legendary past. Its slogan was "The Studio With the Team Spirit." Balcon describes his emotional state upon his arrival at Ealing,

So I settled down to what proved to be . . . the happiest and most rewarding period of my working life: to work in the little house near the studio entrance where my office was a small pine-panelled room leading on to a suburban garden.<sup>7</sup>

People were hired on the basis of their conviviality as well as their talent. A community of like-minded spirits was gradually assembled by Balcon and a system of internal promotion evolved. T.E.B. Clarke had become friendly with members of the Ealing crew, including producer Monja "Danny" Danischewsky, Harry Watt and Angus Macphail. He was hired although "Mick Balcon had been dubious . . . asking, 'What films has he written?' To which dear Danny replied, 'None—but he's lived plenty'."<sup>8</sup> Balcon stressed the multifaceted nature of film production and encouraged his staff to work up through the ranks, taking on gradually more difficult roles. Robert Hamer was engaged by Balcon in 1941 as an editor. By 1943, he was producer/writer of *San Demetrio, London* and in 1945 he emerged as

the director/writer of *Pink String and Sealing Wax*. Balcon countered later arguments about the "inbred" nature of Ealing by stating, "working this way certainly produced for a number of years those films which had some sense of national pride."<sup>9</sup>

Ealing—and Balcon—recognized the value of being a cottage operation and remaining a small studio even in the face of competition from the giants of the film industry. It wanted its distinctive and intelligent voice to be identifiable through the commercial din. Most intriguingly, the project for Ealing, quite self-evidently, was to reflect the national character as they perceived it, even in their methods of creating film.

Since Ealing members worked (and socialized) together for many years, and especially since many of the writers and directors worked together to create the films, a house style emerged that superseded the ideas of any one of them. As the analysis of the three representative comedies, the work of five arguably brilliant artists, will demonstrate, the attitude, atmosphere, narrative structure and humour are all of a piece and represent an artistic, Studio-based, aesthetic.

In carefully considering the texts of these films, a similar set of artistic tensions within the narratives become apparent. While on the surface, carefully constructed plots involving the acquisition of material wealth, fame and prestige are unfolding, quite a different set of sub-texts is also taking place. The elegant, cool tone of the film masks complex emotional states. In *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, for example, the humour arises from the brittle, epigrammatic nature of the protagonist who calmly murders his entire family. The character of Louis Mazzini/Dennis Price is clearly wrestling with an Oedipal complex arising from his childhood spent alone with the adored mother who was denied her fortune because she married for love. The humour of the piece for the audience comes from their unconscious recognition of his psychological state, even while they remain conventionally amused by the clever methodology employed by Mazzini in dispatching his relatives. Similarly, the humour in *The Lavender Hill Mob* ostensibly is created by the contradictions inherent in an uptight bank clerk (Alec Guinness) and a small-time "gewgaw" manufacturer (Stanley Holloway) pulling off an imaginary robbery. What is understated is even more intriguing: a Platonic love develops between the two men and the emotional flow of the tale moves from their first "cute" meeting at

their boarding house, to embraces on the staircase dividing their rooms, concluding with one of them having to sacrifice himself for the other. In *The Man in the White Suit*, both labour and capital assume that the scientist can be bought off, either for love or money, but Sidney Stratton (Alec Guinness again) exists in a childlike, innocent, pre-sexual state and cannot comprehend that anyone could be so base as to suppress his masterpiece.

What is humour? What makes audiences laugh? Mel Brooks recently described his humour as having its roots in old-fashioned Yiddish comedy, which is based on some kind of failure—making fun of the inept. It is the cruelty of laughing while thinking, "Thank God, it's not me."<sup>10</sup> The humour of the Ealing comedies is far more subtle and is closer to what Freud calls displacement. The example Freud cites comes extremely close to paralleling the humour of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*:

What is a cannibal who has eaten his father and mother?

—An orphan

And if he has eaten all his other relations as well?

—The sole heir

And where will a monster of that kind find sympathy?

—In the dictionary under 'S'<sup>11</sup>

The obliqueness, subtlety and coolness of the facetious responses of Freud's example provide the distraction or element of surprise that he claims are desirable for "the automatic course of the joking process."<sup>12</sup> The audience should not be obliged to think about the joke before laughing. That there was such harmony between the British moviegoing public and creative minds at the Ealing Studios is a tribute to both, as audiences today might find it necessary to think—if only for a second—about some of the literary and sociological references to appreciate the full flavour of Ealing humour.

Other examples of displacement can be found in *The Man in the White Suit* and *The Lavender Hill Mob*. In the former, it is a case of mistaken identity: Guinness, who has accepted a position as a labourer in Birnley's textile mill, is helping to deliver a large package to the lab. As he is unpacking what proves to be an electron microscope, researchers mistake him for one of the experts from the company that built it, and deferentially ask him if he couldn't spare them a few weeks to train them in the micro-

**OPPOSITE:** Above—The embrace of capitalism. Guinness and Cecil Parker in *The Man in the White Suit*. Below—the technical team flank Greenwood and Guinness.







scope's use. Guinness is delighted to oblige, because this will allow him needed research time (and equipment) for his experiments, while the head of the laboratory assumes that he is getting a good deal by acquiring an expert consultant for free. In the latter film, Guinness' superiors at the bank mistake his diffidence and zeal in the bullion office for a lack of initiative and creativity, but feel he should be rewarded (after 20 years of service) with a small promotion—a promotion which Guinness tries to reject because it would take him off the delivery truck, making his dream of a grand robbery impossible to fulfil.

Displacement, or irony, is only one element of Ealing humour. The comedies are plot-heavy and the machinations of the protagonists as they overcome the odds to achieve their ambitions provide much of the laughter. The protagonists share an obsession with inappropriate goals; they vary in their particular talents but not in their dedication. They reject the notion of advancement through merit with the exception of the scientific Stratton, who is portrayed as being a naïf in such matters. The "set-pieces" that demonstrate their singlemindedness and their ingenuity are also the most humorous of the films. The British audience, composed of far less obsessive individuals, laughed in recognition of the absurd lengths to which the protagonists had to go in order to realize their ambitions in post-war England.

In *The Man in the White Suit*, one of Sidney Stratton's preliminary experiments succeeds, but he is treated as a madman and the results of his work are destroyed. When he finally persuades Birnley, the owner of the plant, to fund his research, he finds it next to impossible to repeat the successful experiment—with explosive results occurring in its stead. Rather than admit defeat, Stratton confidently takes over the lab, evicting its usual occupants, and requiring nearby offices to resort to sandbags and hard hats in self-defense. In such a setting, a public relations officer adamantly denies rumours of anything unusual going on to the press. Stratton and his assistant remove themselves from the scene and settle behind a barrier to ignite the charge on the latest attempt, when Birnley walks in without concern; he has his face next to the test tube when its contents react—in a repetition of the successful experiment rather than the explosion Stratton feared—and expected! The fear of pure science or of technology motivates the laughter, which is spurred on by the shifting atti-

tudes toward the project by labour and capital.

In an extreme case of dedication to the dream, Henry Holland/Alec Guinness in *The Lavender Hill Mob* takes a plunge that might have been suicidal: abandoned by his accomplices, eyes taped shut, hands tied behind his back, Holland must make it appear that he, as the bank clerk, is also a victim of the heist. He rubs himself in dirt, crawls out on a roof to scream incoherently, and finally jumps into the river. Only coincidentally are the police close enough to witness the denouement and to rescue him. The audience knows that Holland inflicted the bruises upon himself but the police assume he was attacked by a gang of thieves and the Bank hails him as a hero. Holland's singlemindedness (to the point of recklessness) is demonstrated again when the conspirators arrive at the height of their achievement, the platform at the top of the Eiffel Tower, only to discover that some of the gold "souvenirs" have been mistakenly sold to the British schoolgirls. A lesser individual—including his partner—might have philosophically let the six pieces go. But Holland insists that it would be disastrous if the towers were discovered to be gold back in England, so they begin their descent into Hell. Missing the little girls by a hair's-breadth at every turn, they race down the Tower on foot in a surrealistic scene that pre-dates a similar dream in *Zazie dans le Metro* (1960). The chase continues to the port at Calais, where the partners miss the boat because they are constantly referred to another desk—passport, foreign exchange, customs—and culminates in the exhibition at the police academy where they are discovered to be the robbers. The theme of diabolical technology also appears, as Holland and Pendlebury momentarily confuse and evade the police, who are still attempting to learn how to use their new "wireless" cars.

All of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* is, in some sense, a set-piece. There is not a scene without its element of humour, whether of displacement, machinations, or character. Mazzini tries to match each murder to the personality of the individual (the more likely to avoid detection). The tipsy, and boring, old canon is dispatched by a drop of poison in the after-dinner port (administered by Mazzini in the guise of the Bishop of Matabililand). The retired General who entertains at his club by recounting tales of battles long past is sent an enormous pot of caviar (in which a bomb is concealed) anonymously to his club. In one of the most

brilliant sequences, the amateur photographer, young Henry, whose dark-room is amply supplied with the alcohol his wife has forbidden him to drink, is eliminated when he lights the darkroom lamp, in which Mazzini has replaced the paraffin with petrol. Meanwhile, we see Mazzini and Henry's wife, Edith, enjoying their tea and a concerned discussion about Henry's future, while Mazzini's voice-over tells of how odd it felt to be discussing Henry's future at a time when he no longer had one.

Louis Mazzini is a cold-blooded murderer of six of his relatives in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*: his obsession is to avenge the wrongs done to his mother by her family, the secondary goal is to become the Duke of Chalfont with its concomitant money and prestige. He is profoundly sexually alienated. There is his impossible love for his mother, which he sublimates through the killing of her relatives and which he further sublimates through his love for the pure-hearted Edith. There is also his passion for the woman who ultimately proves to be his nemesis and who represents the "whore" in the Freudian dichotomy, his childhood friend, Sibella. The complexity of Louis' personality contributes greatly to the belief that *Kind Hearts and Coronets* is Robert Hamer's, and Ealing's, masterpiece.

Louis' complexity extends beyond his sexuality and his obsession with revenge, however. Following the death of his mother, only Sibella knows who he really is. Everyone else he encounters is presented with either a caricature of the "real" Louis Mazzini—devoted amateur photographer; a gentleman with the most delicate feelings; a sympathetically grieving relative determined, if humbly, to do well at his new position—or with an entirely false persona, such as the Bishop of Matabililand. It is noteworthy that even though Louis is offered a legitimate route to money and status through his uncle's bank, he still chooses to pursue his ultimate obsession. As with Henry "Dutch" Holland in *The Lavender Hill Mob*, and Sidney Stratton in *The Man in the White Suit*, it is Louis' dedication to perfection that drives him inexorably toward his fate.

Holland is also marked by the possession of multiple personas although on a much simpler level than Mazzini. For 20 years, Holland presents the face of a simple, dedicated clerk to his employers and to the world around him while he conceives of a method to rob his employers of the gold it is his duty to guard. He carefully builds up patterns of behaviour that raise him totally above suspicion of robbery. His



employers, meanwhile, think of him as being dull-witted and unambitious. When the critical moment arrives, Holland proves himself to be not only a meticulous planner, but a man so dedicated to the realization of his plan that he goes to absurd lengths to achieve it. He is also an affectionate partner, bestowing the only genuine emotions displayed in the film on Stanley Holloway's Pendlebury and, to a lesser extent, on Sid James and Alfie Cook, the other members of the Lavender Hill Mob.

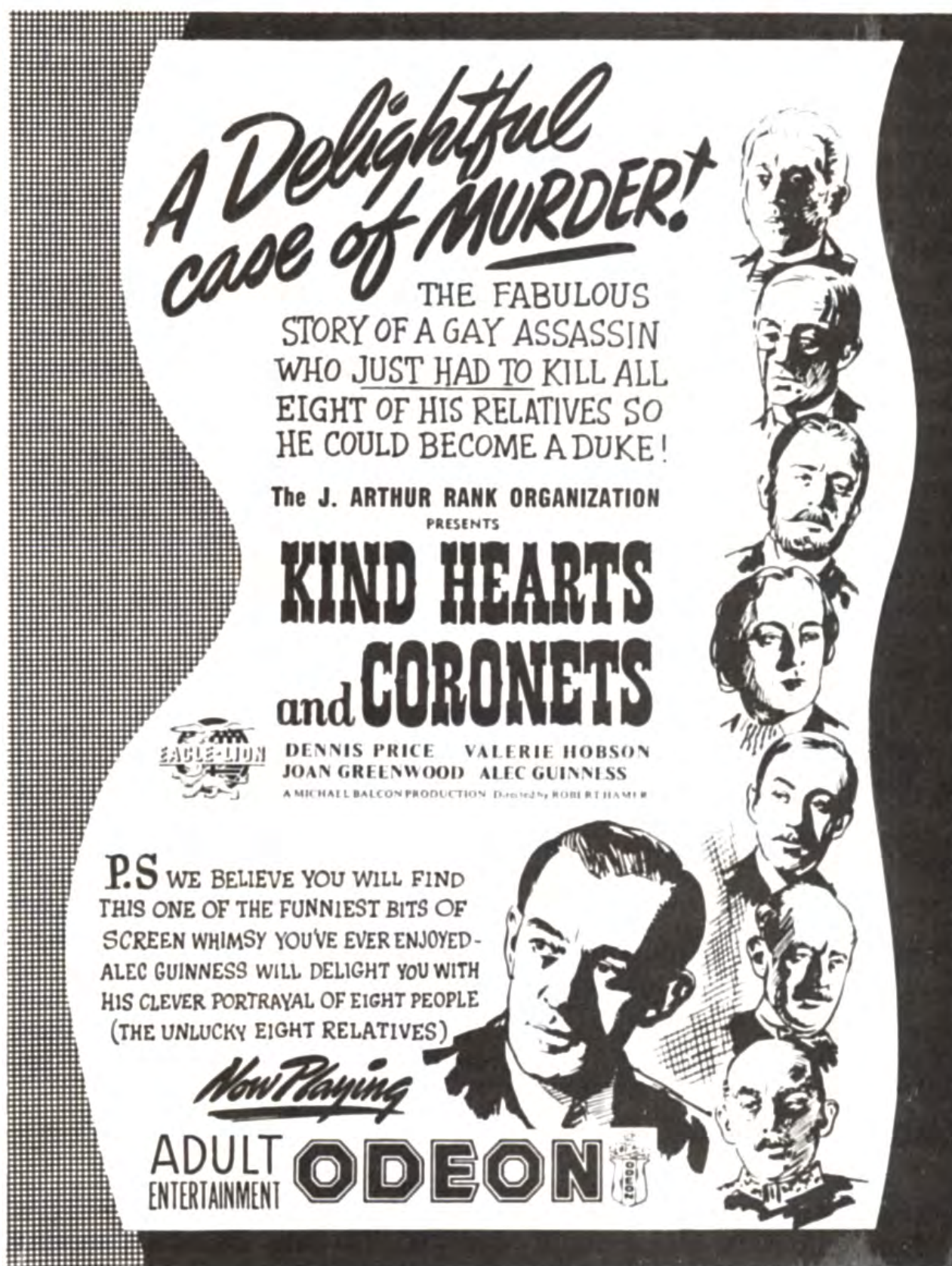
The Man in the White Suit, Stratton, also hides his true colours from his employers. It is clear from his monologues in the mirror, into which he reveals his anger at the rejection he has faced from every employer despite his Cambridge education, that he is a profoundly disturbed and alienated individual. Whereas Mazzini and Holland are shown to lead complete lives (however skewed they may be), Stratton has a severely stunted one. He is absolutely dedicated to his goal of creating the perfect fibre and perfectly incapable of obtaining or holding the kind of job that would allow him to pursue his research. In each factory, he is able to set up a work bench and to obtain vast amounts of equipment, completely unbeknownst to the bosses. Although he does not purposely try to hide his personality, it has already become so deeply submerged that it exists only in terms of his idealism and desire for "clean" scientific utilitarianism. Like Holland, he has the opportunity to take most of the prize (he is offered large amounts of money for his discovery) but rejects the offer in favour of maintaining control of the ultimate objective—total perfection. The Man in the White Suit suffers the greatest humiliation of the three characters when his achievement literally is ripped to shreds in the hands of his enemies, who turn from fearing his power to laughing at his impotence in a matter of seconds.

It is instructive to compare Ealing Comedies with two other important film genres which were burgeoning during the immediate post-War period, neo-realism and film noir. As has already been shown, Michael Balcon had self-consciously intended his Studio to reflect and project the actuality of Great Britain during that period. In contemporaneous Ealing dramas, Hamer's *It Always Rains on Sundays* (1947) was particularly regarded for its neo-realist look, while *The Overlanders* and *The Blue Lamp* certainly benefit from a documentarian approach. It is in the comedies, however, much more than the dramas, that Ealing employed a

neo-realist style. *Hue and Cry* and *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) effectively use the settings of bombed-out London to create a proper ambience from which the humour inevitably evolves. The natural warmth and humanity of the boys in *Hue and Cry* remind one of their counterparts in de Sica's *Shoeshine* (1945). *Miracle in Milan* (1952), the de Sica/Zavattini fantasy, bears some resemblance to *Passport to Pimlico* in terms of tone, depiction of urban milieu and a generally "liberal" philosophy of life. Much as neo-realist dramas emerged from the grafting of melodramatic plots onto naturalistic settings, Ealing's comedies arose from the construction of fantastic premises onto recognizable people and locales.

In comparing film noir to these comedies, one finds many striking similarities. All three of the films dealt with in detail here, *The Man in the White Suit*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, and *Kind Hearts*

and *Coronets*, are structured in the flashback format most commonly associated with such noirs as *Out of the Past* (1947) and *Double Indemnity* (1944). There is an ambiguity in one's comprehension of what the narrator tells the audience in *Kind Hearts* and *Coronets* that is similar to that of *Stage Fright* (1950) and *Sorry Wrong Number* (1948). In both noirs and Ealing Comedies, there is an obsessive character who plays out a grand scheme that we expect—due to the structure—to see fail. This creates a tension in the narrative and an underlying expectation of fate having pre-determined the outcome of life's scenarios. The difference between the comedies and film noir is in their emotional voicings. While noirs are, by nature, romantic, the Ealing Comedies are brittle and cool. The cinematography in noirs tends to be expressionistic, while Ealing Comedies were often shot in a plain, unobtrusive



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manner. And, of course, the major star of the comedies was Alec Guinness while a comparable noir protagonist was Robert Mitchum.

There is a curiously poetic concluding scene in *The Man in the White Suit* that has particular resonance in a consideration of Ealing and its claims on the British public. Stratton, the presumably defeated inventor, is seen walking away down the street. His progress is being monitored by the factory owner, Birnley, who has been the narrator of the events detailed in the film. As it is foregrounded the audience is meant initially to accept Birnley's relief that "sanity has now been restored to the industry." And yet—from his perspective on high, through a window in his office—the factory owner perceives a sudden resolution in Stratton's walk. As the soundtrack repeats the peculiarly engaging "industrial" music of chemicals cooking in beakers, Birnley is left with a disquieting thought: Has the textile world really seen the last of Sidney Stratton?

Without unduly straining the meaning of this episode, might we not view Stratton as a metaphorical figure, representing the artists of Ealing in the thrall of yet another dream, while Birnley comes to represent the good, gray Britain of the 1950s, willing to entertain any notion, but always stolidly taking its place with the conservative (J. Arthur) Rank and file? Mackendrick allows us a final evocative image of Guinness, in a Keatonesque perambulation, dashing off through the factory town, deeply engaged in his own thoughts of the perfect fibre. Yet *Man in the White Suit*'s profoundly melancholy view of man's lack of progress in a class-bound structure finally acts as a justification for the lessening of artistic tension in later Ealing films. If neither

capital nor labour was ready for a truly radical cinema in the 1950s, Michael Balcon was only too willing to beat a retreat back into a more nostalgic mode of representation. The Balcon who had written in 1945 that his company would make films detailing "Britain as a leader in Social Reform . . . as a patron and parent of great writing, as a questing explorer, adventurer and trader"<sup>13</sup> was reduced by 1956 to claiming that all Ealing wanted to do was make ". . . films about day-dreamers, mild anarchists, little men who long to kick the boss in the teeth."<sup>14</sup> This decline in resolve indicates that in little more than a decade, Balcon's company had shifted from a central belief in a British notion of progress to an insular, backward slippage into conservative thought. The result was that the little cottage industry that had said so much about the British character of the time made its final statement by closing its doors . . . but not before leaving its audiences—past and future—with a wealth of great cinematic creations. □

## END NOTES

1. *The Man in the White Suit* (1951) dir. Alexander Mackendrick, ass. prod. Sidney Cole, scr. Roger Macdougall, Mackendrick, John Dighton, from Macdougall's play. Photog. Douglas Slocombe, Music by Benjamin Granke. With Alec Guinness (Sidney Stratton), Cecil Parker (Birnley), Joan Greenwood (Daphne Birnley).
2. *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951) dir. Charles Crichton, ass. prod. Michael Truman, scr. T.E.B. Clarke. photog. by Douglas Slocombe. With Alec Guinness (Holland), Stanley Holloway (Pendlebury), Sidney James (Lackery), Alfie Bass (Shorty).
3. *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) dir. Robert Hamer, ass. prod. Michael Relph, scr. Hamer,

John Dighton from the novel *Israel Rank* by Roy Homan, photog. by Douglas Slocombe. With Dennis Price (Louis Mazzini), Joan Greenwood (Sibella), Valerie Hobson (Edith), Alec Guinness (Ascoyne d'Ascoyne/Henry d'Ascoyne/Canon d'Ascoyne/Admiral d'Ascoyne/General d'Ascoyne/Lady Agatha d'Ascoyne/Lord d'Ascoyne/Ethelbert, Duke of Chalfont/the old Duke).

4. Michael Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents . . . A Lifetime of Films*, London: Hutchinson, 1969, p. 185.
5. The classic Ealing Comedies are *Hue and Cry* (1947) dir. Charles Crichton, scr. T.E.B. Clarke; *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) dir. Henry Cornelius, scr. Clarke; *Whiskey Galore* (1949) dir. Alexander Mackendrick, scr. Compton Mackenzie, Angus Macphail; *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, *The Man in the White Suit*, *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953) dir. Crichton, scr. Clarke; *The Maggie* (1954) dir. Mackendrick, scr. William Rose; and *The Ladykillers* (1955) dir. Mackendrick, scr. Rose.
6. Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, London: Cameron & Tayleur in association with David & Charles, 1977, p. 7.
7. Balcon, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
8. T.E.B. Clarke, *This is where I came in*, London: Michael Joseph, 1974, pp. 138-139.
9. Balcon, *op. cit.*, p. 138.
10. E. Graydon Carter, "The World According to Mel Brooks," *Vogue*, June 1987, p. 271.
11. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983 (first published 1905), p. 206, FN 1.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
13. Barr, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
14. Barr, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

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# CAVELL AND THE FANTASY OF CRITICISM: Shakespearean Comedy and *Ball of Fire*

by Leland Poague

**I**N JULY OF 1975 THE HARVARD PHILOSOPHER Stanley Cavell delivered a paper to an NEH sponsored conference on "Film and the University" in which he offered a "reading" of some moments and aspects of Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby*. Though his larger goal in the essay was to specify the ways in which film study might make an honorable claim to an important role in a humanistic curriculum, and though his remarks on *Bringing Up Baby* were posed more to ask questions of method than to answer them, at several points Cavell was moved to set his understanding of *Bringing Up Baby* in the context of Northrop Frye's work on Shakespearean comedy and romance, an understanding Cavell subsequently elaborated on in a book entitled *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. In the remarks which follow I want to meditate further on Cavell's particular construal of the critical and historical significance of this Shakespeare/cinema connection.

In part this means I need to address the curious fact that in *Pursuit of Happiness* Cavell rarely makes any claims for direct influence or allusiveness. Only one chapter in the book goes very deeply into a comparative mode—Cavell invokes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as subtextually present throughout *The Philadelphia Story*—and yet at this very juncture Cavell takes pains to establish the uninterestingness of comparison per se, especially if comparison is employed mechanistically to "reduce the problems of *The Philadelphia Story* to those of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." The interpretive question, for Cavell, "is a matter not so much of assigning significance to certain events of the drama as it is of isolating and relating the events for which significance needs to be assigned" (144-45).

Cavell's awareness of the strain this view imposes is evident in a later discussion of *The Philadelphia Story* (in "The Thought of Movies") where he makes a concerted effort to justify the aptness of his comparing Katherine Hepburn's "I think men are wonderful" declaration to the moment in *The Tempest* when Miranda confesses "How beauteous mankind is." I will conclude the present remarks by noting a more extensive, I hope less strain-inducing, set of apt comparisons which I take to confirm the historical and critical propriety of Cavell's basic generic analogy. But like Cavell I am convinced that aptness here doesn't matter apart from a more general set of convictions about the nature and stakes of film criticism. So I take my primary task on this occasion as the sketching out of these convictions, a mapping of the path to their encounter.

I

Crucial to Cavell's meditations on film comedy are his meditations on the fact of film itself, on its as if magical ability to invoke a world beyond the world of our present senses, one

to which are not normally alive, a fact which exemplifies for Cavell the ongoing threat and fate of epistemological skepticism. In *The Claim of Reason* Cavell defines skepticism as a wish that "the connection between my claims of knowledge and the objects upon which the claims are to fall" will "occur without my intervention, apart from my agreements." The Cartesian catch here is that, in the case of self-knowledge, "I must disappear in order that the search for myself be successful" (351-52). Set against this Cavell's description in *The World Viewed* of the ontological conditions of film-viewing: "To maintain conviction in our connection to reality, to maintain our presentness, painting accepts the recession of the world. Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it. The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity), is a world past" (23). In similar terms, Cavell will later describe the film as "a moving image of skepticism," and precisely because "our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist—even, alarmingly, *because* it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes" (188-89). If this film represents, not merely the look of reality, but its underlying (modernist) condition: "The 'sense of reality' provided on film is the sense of *that* reality, one from which we already sense a distance. Otherwise the thing it provides a sense of would not, for us, count as reality" (226).

These are all mysterious matters, as Cavell's critics are wont to remind him, but as the issues of reality and illusion, of presence and absence, of this world and some other, cut across a second path we can at least see their relevance to Cavell's discussion of Hollywood's inheritance of Shakespearean comedy. Here I would note Cavell's *The World Viewed* remark, in discussing the "myth" of cinema, to the effect that "movies arise out of magic; from *below* the world" (39) and I would compare it to Northrop Frye's discussion in *A Natural Perspective* of the mythical significance of the medium of Shakespearean dramatic poetry. According to Frye, Shakespearean romance (also) has its origins in magic. Of course, drama gives up the magic of religious ritual, as Prospero surrenders staff and book in *The Tempest*, but "when drama renounces magic," Frye tells us, "it gets [magic] back again through the nature of poetic imagery itself, which assimilates the natural to the human order by analogy and identity, simile and metaphor. The traditional symbol of this lost and regained magic in human art is Orpheus"; his is "the musical, magical, and pastoral power that awakens Thaisa and Hermione, that draws Ferdinand toward Miranda that signalizes the ritual death of Imogen and that gives strange dreams to Caliban" (146-47).

Two aspects of this as-if-magical artfulness bear particularly on Cavell's construal of the Shakespeare/cinema connection. One of these involves a hierarchical sense of the contrast between reality and fantasy. Again I cite *A Natural*



*Perspective*: "The world of tyranny and irrational law [in romantic comedy] is a world where what is real is given us arbitrarily as a datum . . . This is the spectator's reality, the reality we see to be 'out there.' The world of the final festival is a world where reality is what is created by human desire, as the arts are created" (115). And the other magical aspect of Shakespearean poetic imagery involves what we might call the romantic "displacement" of the spectator which follows from this metaphoric assimilation of a lower world of ordinary human nature to an "upper world of magic and music, which is also the world of genuine or restored nature" (154). The romances, on Frye's understanding, "point to some postdramatic world where the questions of illusion and of a detached or alienated spectator are no longer raised" because "we are left with a sense of the action going on into a world where nobody is watching" (111).

The world of romantic comedy, we might say in summary, is a world "past" in two senses; in that it represents what Frye calls "the continuing primitive" in culture, an evocation of an Edenic or golden world from which the present world has fallen; and "past" also in the sense of being "projected," projected from a lower world to an upper world, projected from behind us, "past" us, into some future where we cannot (yet) follow, a world of music and dancing, a lunar world of "stars." That this description can do equal duty as characterizing the ontology of cinema is one reason for thinking that Cavell is genuinely on to something in asserting a mythic connection of Shakespearean and Hollywood comedy. It also speaks to the sense in which film, as the world now stands, is an inherently fantastic, if not romantic, medium—exposing our fears of contingency, the awareness that our connections to reality are necessarily ephemeral and transient, yet invoking simultaneously our desire *for* a world elsewhere. As Cavell describes this connection in "More of the World Viewed": "If one thinks of the Romance, say of *The Winter's Tale*, as the satisfaction of impossible yet unappeasable human wishes, and hence as defining a presiding wish of movies generally, one might think of [Hitchcock's] *Vertigo* as a declaration of the end of Romance" (203). The catch would then be that Romance, in this sense, is *always* declaring its ending, as a way of acknowledging our *inability* to end our wishing.

Also crucial to Cavell's meditations on the generic connection of Shakespearean comedy and Hollywood comedy are his meditations on the concept of genre itself. Again I adduce Frye's *A Natural Perspective* as offering crucial points of comparison or contrast. One common element in their descriptions is the reference point of modern painting. In Frye the reference is meant to place and counter a view (associated for both Frye and Cavell with Ben Jonson and his dramatic heirs) which condemns Shakespeare's "deliberate departure from the conventions of realism" (18). Frye's point is that our interest in Shakespearean comedy follows precisely from its ability to "draw us away from the analogy to familiar experience into a strange but consistent and self-contained dramatic world" (19)—a tendency Frye compares not only to the abstraction of modern painting but also to opera and to modern poetry.

In Cavell the analogy with modern painting also functions to specify a relation to artistic tradition—but part of Cavell's point (in *The World Viewed*) is to complicate what we mean by words such as "medium" and "genre," Cavell wanting to insist on their conceptual interrelationship despite the film-critical habit of taking the word "medium" as referring exclusively and honorifically to the technical or material aspects of filmmaking, hence leaving to the lesser category of "genre"

the kinds of narrative or mythic convention typically associated with Hollywood. Cavell's larger point regarding modernist genres—in every art tradition—involves the art work's (and worker's) obligation to investigate the work's own physical basis, to search out its own conditions of existence (107); "what a [modern] painter or poet or composer has to achieve in his painting or poetry or music," says Cavell, "is not a landscape or sonnet or fugue, but the idea of his art as such" (106). These achievements are impossible, however, without attending to or creating particular works like landscapes and fugues. As Cavell puts it, "the aesthetic properties of a medium are not givens. You can no more tell what will give significance to the unique and specific aesthetic properties of projecting photographic images by thinking about them or seeing some than you can tell what will give significance to the possibilities of paint by thinking about paint or by looking some over. You have to think about painting, and paintings; you have to think about motion pictures" (31). In other words, the "medium" of film is unknowable apart from knowing the historical genres which comprise it, conventions which do not so much *follow* from technical facts as they help to create those facts by "giving significance to specific possibilities. Only the art itself can discover its possibilities, and the discovery of a new possibility is the discovery of a new medium" (32).

This conception of genre as intersecting with or inflecting the concept of an artistic medium points to another conjunction of Frye or Cavell. There is a common tendency among Frye's followers to take his theory of archetypes or genres in a schematically Jungian sense. Frye occasionally follows himself in this regard, as in the following passage from *A Natural Perspective* which can easily leave the impression that comic conventions are immutable. To the question "Does anything that exhibits the structure of a comedy have to be taken as comedy, regardless of its content or of our attitude to that content?" Frye answers "clearly yes. A comedy is not a play which ends happily: it is a play to which a certain structure is present and works through to its own logical end" (46). It is this almost ahistorical view of genre which Cavell's work on film comedy effectively interrogates, by historicizing it along the lines suggested above—by discovering new possibilities in the historical conditions of an art form as those conditions are in turn defined by (and are defining of) new art works.

Among the historical conditions which the films in question study and lend significance to is the very existence of the sound film as a dramatic and poetic medium fully comparable in its deepest and finest moments to Shakespearean dramatic verse—in the poetry of its almost philosophical flights of dialogue (e.g., Hepburn's echo of Miranda cited above) and also in the romantic visual poetry of its lucidly black and white images. Another condition, closely implicated in the latter aspect of film imagery, is the presence at exactly the right historical moment of a group of actresses—preeminently Kate Hepburn and Barbara Stanwyck—who in voice and face, in gait and gesture, revealed extraordinary capacities and courage for self-revelation on film, a capacity often pictured in scenes of impersonation and self-dramatization, a capacity which made them more than fit subjects for the study of female identity and its metamorphoses which Cavell finds at the heart of the Hollywood genre in question.

Far and away the most significant historical condition underlying and explored within the comedies of remarriage is a road not much travelled in the history of dramatic comedy since the Renaissance, or if travelled, taken as a detour



through the precincts of opera, the road passing from the New Comedy of Plautus and Terence through the romantic comedies of Shakespeare's middle period to the sublime epiphanies of Shakespeare's late romances. And as subsequently taken up in Hollywood, this inheritance, this mythic story, is interpreted or revised in two key respects. Unlike the typical New Comedy fable, though like a number of Shakespearean comedies, the primary focus of dramatic action in the comedies of remarriage tends to fall on the female member of the comic couple, who undergoes something like death and rebirth. And the comic drive in these films is not a matter of getting young lovers together, against the wishes of the woman's father, but of getting older lovers *back* together, often with paternal blessing, after getting or threatening divorce. Let Cavell continue the recitation here. "The central idea," he says in "A Capra Moment," is "that the validity or bond of marriage is no longer assured or legitimized by church or state or sexual compatibility or children but by something I call the willingness for remarriage, a way of continuing to affirm the happiness of one's initial leap, as if the chance of happiness exists only when it seconds itself. In classical comedy people made for each other find one another; in remarriage comedy people who *have* found one another find that they *are* made for each other" (3).

Before going on to say a few words proposing Howard Hawks' *Ball of Fire* for membership in the genre of remarriage I pause to note a set of ontological analogies which lend considerable interpretive and epistemological resonance to the list of generic conditions cited above. I take direction here from a later Cavell essay, on "The Fact of Television," where he comments that "genre-as-medium" (as he there describes the conceptual intersection noted above) overthrows the rule of "formula"; on this view membership within a genre is *not* determined before the fact of criticism, by the mere *possession* of features. Rather, belonging "has to be won, earned, as by an argument of the members with one another" (247). Genre members are not *identical*; identity yields duplication, as a mathematical formula yields results. So genre membership is earned, on Cavell's construal, by what he terms "compensation," by dropping or changing a key feature, a gesture which then introduces or reveals a new aspect of the genre, an aspect which comes to stand as an interpretation of the feature dropped out.

In "The Fact of Television" Cavell takes this understanding of genre history as a virtual "allegory of the relation of the principle pair [of characters] in remarriage comedy. In their adventures of conversation, the pair are forever taking each other by surprise, forever interesting each other anew (248)—as, for instance, by taking their divorce as compensation for, as reinterpreting, their marriage. And we can extend this allegory one step further by noting that criticism itself, for Cavell, is a similar adventure of conversation by which and through which we attempt to marry our words to the world, despite our divorcements from it, in ways which do full duty to the tenuousness and transiency of our epistemological circumstances. One counters skepticism, in life and in criticism, not by denying its appeal but by accepting, by acknowledging the fact, that the relations of claims and objects just *are* words and their agreements. Finding words we can agree on to describe the objects and moments of our experience, taking responsibility for those words, as film characters take responsibility for their marriages, as members for their genres, is the task and grammar of social life. Cavell is wont to call this task a fantasy (hence my title). The cutting edge of this fantasy is its terrible and irrevocable reality. We cannot awake out of it, from it. We must therefore awake *to* it. In what follows I offer a preview of what one awakes to in

describing Howard Hawks' *Ball of Fire* as responding to the inheritance of Shakespearean comedy and to the subsequent legacy of the comedies of remarriage.

## II

The story begins something like this. A group of scholars, first encountered in a "great tall forest" or park, and dedicated to the pursuit of "all human knowledge," is pledged to three (more) years of celibate inquiry. Central to that inquiry is the question of language and of its more specialized or fashionable uses. Into this circumstance several women intrude, one to negotiate on behalf of her father's financial interests; yet another feigning affection for, eventually to be attracted to, the most articulate member of the little academe. A hanger-on, distinguished in part by his childish vocabulary, is arrested and queried about a sexual relationship, though it turns out that a self-important braggart is the one who chiefly pines after the woman in question. Issues of law and marriage arise, especially regarding the matter of lawful residency. Of particular imagistic interest are various references to eyes and to light as tokens of affectual and intellectual energy. Eventually the threat or fact of death cuts short a celebration by which the scholars prepare to fore-swear an oath of celibacy in favour of sexual fidelity.

And the story continues along to a kind of fairy tale conclusion. Against a background of foreign wars, a lower-class woman associated with music and magic and dancing restores a failing leader to health and uses the occasion as opportunity to contract a marriage. Rings are exchanged, one given her by a grateful dignitary. Her betrothed leaves the city; she follows in a kind of disguise. A sexually inexperienced fellow named Bertram subsequently enters a darkened room where he unknowingly betrays his true feelings to his betrothed, who occupies the room against his expectation. He returns home embittered—only to be confronted by yet another exchange of rings which, together with the encouragement of his elders, awakens him to his true love.

The echoes here of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *All's Well that Ends Well* ought to be resonant enough to require little additional comment, at least as far as the obvious aspect of borrowing goes. For those who require greater explicitness when it comes to attributing intellectual or cultural sophistication to Hollywood filmmakers I simply note a scene roughly midway through *Ball of Fire* when Gary Cooper's Professor Bertram Potts proposes marriage to Barbara Stanwyck's Sugarpuss O'Shea. The proposal takes the form, we might say, of literary criticism or citation, Bertram describing his life-to-date as a preface, to which the proposed marriage stands as first chapter in a much longer book. As it happens, part of the preface is Blake's "The Tyger," which Bertram was reciting by age one; and the first words of chapter one are encoded in the very ring which Bertram offers in token of his earnest affections. The code itself is chiefly a sequence of numbers, *Richard III*, Act I, scene ii, line 204; as Bertram subsequently recites it (sic) from (a slightly faulty) memory: "Look how this ring encompasseth thy finger,/ Even so thy breast encloseth my poor heart:/ Wear both of them, for both of them are thine." That Shakespeare is used *at all* in this context proves the value of staying open to the prospect of a Shakespearean intertext. That Hawks and his screenwriters (Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett) have Bertram *misusing* Shakespeare—drawing upon Richard Plantagenet's hypocritically self-serving profession of love for the newly-widowed Princess of Wales as adequately expressing his own altogether genuine, if somewhat falsely grounded,







affections—warns us against presuming in advance how deep and abiding such connections might prove upon reflection.

Let us then assume the *fact* of *Ball of Fire*'s generic inheritance of Shakespearean comedy; that fact only half settles the question of the film's meaningful participation in Cavell's "comedy of remarriage" genre. Recall that remarriage comedy revises New Comedy in two key respects—by placing the work's focus far more clearly on the female member of the comic couple, and by interpreting the comic drive, not as a movement toward marriage per se, but as one towards divorce and/or marriage. That the former condition or provision obtains in *Ball of Fire* can be demonstrated by recasting my summary of the film's action into a more native descriptive idiom.

At film's beginning Gary Cooper's English Professor is chief spokesman for and task master of "The Totten Foundation," the faculty of which is engaged in an encyclopedia project with the financial backing of a disgruntled (and deceased) electric toaster magnate who never forgave the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for giving Thomas Edison (father, one might well note, of the motion picture) greater space than himself. Professor Potts and his fellow "book-mates" are "bogged down in the letter 's'" when he discovers that his article on slang is remarkably outdate. So he takes to the streets and ballparks, poolrooms and nightclubs—and in one of the latter he encounters the "Ball of Fire" of the film's title, Sugarpuss O'Shea, chanteuse extraordinaire and the intended of one Joe Lilac, currently under police investigation in connection with a body found sporting cement shoes en route to the bottom of the East River. As the only real evidence linking Joe to the crime is a pair of pajamas purportedly given him by Sugar, Joe's lawyer recommends a hasty marriage which will prevent Sugar's testimony. So just as Sugar needs a hideout where she can remain safely on ice while her "Daddy" arranges for the marriage ceremony, Professor Potts shows up at her dressing room door and invites her to the foundation as a research associate—an offer she quickly takes him up on, though without revealing her true motives. So far we are not especially distanced from the world of *Love's Labour's Lost*.

But in the remainder of the film, from the moment of Sugar's arrival at the foundation, we encounter a series of events (recited above) recalling those in *All's Well that Ends Well*, as regards the ironic or realist sexual cynicism represented in Shakespeare by Parolles and in Hawks by Joe Lilac, but also (and chiefly) as regards the folkloristic associations of magic and music with the central female character, Helena, in *All's Well* and Sugar in *Ball of Fire*. Briefly, Sugar's effect on her foundation colleagues is one of rejuvenation, of spirits as well as of knowledge—before long she has everyone but Potts dancing mad congas through the foundation library—and the eventual progress of events results finally in the rejuvenation of Sugar herself, in that her relationship with Bertram poses itself as a viable alternative to the far more mercenary relationships she maintains with Joe Lilac. Indeed, in the film's later moments it is only by threatening Bertram with a set of cement shoes that Lilac manages to solicit Sugar's cooperation in the marriage scam—and it is by sending Bertram Joe's ring (instead of the one Bertram gave her) that Sugar declares her love and prompts her rescue.

Cavell's second provision—that remarriage comedy posits the avoidance of divorce in lieu of the arrival at marriage—

presents a more complex interpretive problem as regards *Ball of Fire*'s generic inheritance. I note that *All's Well That Ends Well* is itself a kind of "remarriage comedy"; Helena "marries" her Bertram twice, as it were, once before the king, a second time in Diana's darkened room. And I note as well that this "doubleness" is picked up in *Ball of Fire* in Sugar's twin engagements, initially to Joe, subsequently to Bertram. But I want here to confront the literal fact that no marriage whatsoever takes place within the film, however often it is promised or threatened.

That *Ball of Fire* does not *begin* with a married couple is the lesser of the two problems we must face in this regard. There is at least an *earlier* marriage figured in the person of the widowed Professor Oddly. (Potts is in search of Oddly's fatherly reassurance when he mistakenly enters Sugar's room, thinking it Oddly's.) But there is more general precedent in the genre which allows us to take a form of childishness, of a shared childhood, as adequate compensation for the missing first marriage.

The underlying moral of Cavell's "remarriage" notion is not merely an acknowledgment of the obvious fact that many great Hollywood comedies begin with a couple already married. It is also designed to capture the sense in which public marriage ceremonies are insufficiently defining of the intimacy and worth of human relationships. Remarriage comedy, as described in *Pursuits of Happiness*, "expects the pair to find happiness alone, unsponsored, in one another, out of their capacities for improvising a world, beyond ceremony" (239). And this capacity for improvisation Cavell associates quite explicitly with playfulness and pretending and repetition. To remarry is to reinvent a world in which repetition is not deadening, to which one can wish to remain faithful. Typically this means rediscovering what made marriage truly worthwhile in the first place. But in some of the films under discussion the "world elsewhere" is a world of childhood play and game. In *Bringing Up Baby* this is most obviously the case as David and Susan run through a moonlit forest chasing after a leopard and a dog, "as though their summer night were spent not falling in love at first or second sight, but in becoming childhood sweethearts, inventing for themselves a shared, lost past" (127). This generic connection of childhood intimacy and remarriage is strikingly confirmed in the closing comments of *The Awful Truth* when Irene Dunne asserts her claim to Cary Grant's sexual loyalty by pretending to be his sister before his prospective in-laws.

That we might wish to think of Bertram and Sugar as brother and sister in this sense is at least pointed to by the film's *All's Well that Ends Well* intertext; Helena is the ward of Bertram's mother, and in Act I, scene iii Helena and the Countess discuss at some length what this sibling kinship of Helena and Bertram implies or forbids. The hint is picked up in *Ball of Fire* when Sugar first arrives at the foundation, only to find her Bertram apologetic at his lack of a necktie; she responds that she once "watched [her] big brother shave." And toward the end of the film, after Lilac's lawyer sarcastically compares Sugar's feelings for Bertram to his own childhood crush on his piano teacher ("you're not nine years old"), her subsequent praise of Bertram focuses on and assertively confirms his childlike qualities ("he doesn't even know how to kiss"). If we recall here Bertram's educational history—graduating Princeton at age 13—and also Sugar's remark about being raised by an oppressively fussy aunt, a clear picture develops. Both Sugar and Bertram are in some sense children grown up too soon, hence not quite grown up enough. Sugar's intrusion into the Totten Foundation world thus allows each of them a momentary return to childhood,

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**OPPOSITE:** Above—The exchange of rings: Bertram proposes to Sugar. Below—Tracking the signifier: Gary Cooper as language scholar.



allows the grammarian to be tongue-tied, the chanteuse to read school books. And this returning, in turn, provides motive and occasion for their eventual reunion, provides a world, a past, to which they can remain together loyal.

A catch arises here, however, in that the form of relationship in which Bertram and Sugar remain loyal to each other is not explicitly represented as a marriage. Rather, the film's last two scenes effectively replace a marriage ceremony, that of Joe and Sugar, with something else, and the something else, as far as it is specified, is more akin to academic tenure than to matrimony. After Lilac is turned over to the cops, the scene shifts elliptically to the parlour of the New Jersey justice of the peace, where Sugar and Bertram and his colleagues are engaged in discussion. Sugar says that "it wouldn't work," and she defines "it" here by reference to Bertram's "ship of knowledge" analogy, which a love-shy Potts had used earlier in urging Sugar's prompt departure from the foundation, his essay on slang being done, by appeal to "an old rule of the sea—no women aboard." The other professors now pipe in, however, urging a different set of precedents or figures by which Sugar's "it" might better be defined, drawn from history, geography, literature, etc. And Bertram literally clinches her decision to join the crew by invoking one remaining "argument." He gets a pile of books (borrowing Sugar's gesture from an earlier scene) and asks Sugar to stand on them, whereupon he gives her one of his splendidly innocent Gary Cooper kisses.

Another reading of this final gesture confirms the sense in which, legal ceremony or no, it fulfills the "remarriage" provision of membership in the genre. Tenure is typically acquired, at least as folklore has it, by publication, by transmuting self into text, by risking legibility. I note that Bertram's initial interest in Sugar was a textual interest; she calls it "moving in on [her] brain," he calls it research. Later, when the news breaks about Joe's arrest and her disappearance, Sugar buys every newspaper in sight and stashes them in her bureau drawer. After Bertram's confession of love in Sugar's darkened motel room, she tries to write out a set of "excuses" explaining her deception, though the paper she finally hands Bertram is blank, pure signifier, an acknowledgment, in context, of her change of heart. And a similar species of figural textuality—of metamorphic communication—is seen in the ring she returns to Bertram by Professor Oddly, Joe's ring. Earlier Bertram, in proposing marriage to Sugar, had begun by saying that he had thought himself "married" to his books. In asking her to take her place among his faculty colleagues, by asking her to take a stand atop a pile of books, Bertram effectively acknowledges her status as text, as published scholar, as someone fit to marry words to the world, a book-mate. I note here that, as Cavell (in "Being Odd, Getting Even") reads Emerson reading Descartes, turning self into text is the modern form of the cogito; being legible is the only proof of my own existence. In being legible to each other Sugar and Bertram assume alike the risk and task of skepticism or philosophy, and in the only way possible—by embracing it.

Earlier I noted an ontological or epistemological analogy: as characters are to each other, so are members to their genres, and art works to their mediums; in every instance the relation is one of acknowledgment or responsibility. I take the concluding scene of *Ball of Fire* as fulfilling or interpreting the first two of these obligations; in posing their mutual commitment as a form of textuality, Bertram and Sugar respond to each other and through them the film responds to the genre of remarriage and to its Elizabethan inheritance. I will now close by attending to the way *Ball of Fire* also

acknowledges and claims responsibility for the medium of cinema.

Partly this acknowledgment involves a constant string of verbal and gestural references to other movies; Sugar compares Bertram at one point to Andy Hardy, herself at another to Helen Hayes (thus confirming her kinship to Shakespeare's Helena?), and does her best at yet another to explain the derivation by which "the Ameche" comes to mean "telephone." And there is also a sense in which Cooper and Stanwyck continually evoke the history of their other movies and characters, especially those played out in their previous films with Frank Capra, most specifically *Meet John Doe* which they appeared in together. But I want to cite a particular scene in *Ball of Fire* which can be understood in its precise resonance and placement as a virtual parable of film and its human loyalties, a scene which also throws some additional light on the centrality to the film of Barbara Stanwyck's Sugarpuss O'Shea.

After Joe Lilac and his thugs interrupt Bertram's impromptu New Jersey bachelor party and take Sugar away, Bertram and company return to New York City and the foundation. Soon two of Joe's henchmen arrive and take the whole party, now including Miss Totten and her lawyer among others, hostage. That it requires hostages and machineguns to enforce Sugar's wedding to Joe awakens Bertram from his trance of bitterness—because Sugar won't "say yes," Bertram suddenly feels like "yodelling"—so Bertram and his colleagues undertake to demonstrate to their captors the power of knowledge to set people free.

After a chance remark from the local garbage man gets Professor Jerome thinking about Damocles and his sword, which prompts him to notice the framed portrait of old man Totten hanging "by a single hair" over the head of Dan Duryea, Potts picks up the reference, and questions Professor Gurkakoff about the Roman fleet and Archimedes, at which point the latter quietly shifts the mirror of a microscope so as to direct a beam of light onto the cord suspending the painting. Time must be purchased for the light to burn the cord through, so different faculty members undertake to buy it in various ways, some of which provide further coded instructions for insurrection. The insurrection, comically enough, finally succeeds, and the rescue of Sugar from Joe Lilac follows quickly upon—but I want to suggest that the series of events succeeds equally well as an allegorical acknowledgment of the ontology of cinema. The library set itself is constructed as a stepped amphitheatre, as both a screening room and a sound stage. And the overall action of the scene involves a collaborative effort to direct light at a picture so as to set it in meaningful motion.

I have already spoken of Sugar as a figure of textuality and legibility. The self-reflexiveness of the insurrection scene further interprets her as a figure of and for cinema—which is to say that she is the absent presence which effectively makes the moving picture move. This is true in at least three respects. One involves her refusal to marry Joe, as evidenced in her return of Joe's ring to Bertram and by the presence of Joe's thugs. In this she provides occasion for the use of knowledge. But she also provides at least some of the knowledge so used, at least on Bertram's account. The entire sequence of events in the foundation library, that is, echoes our first view of Sugar, which is Bertram's first view of her as well. Here she sings two numbers, the first a relatively stand-

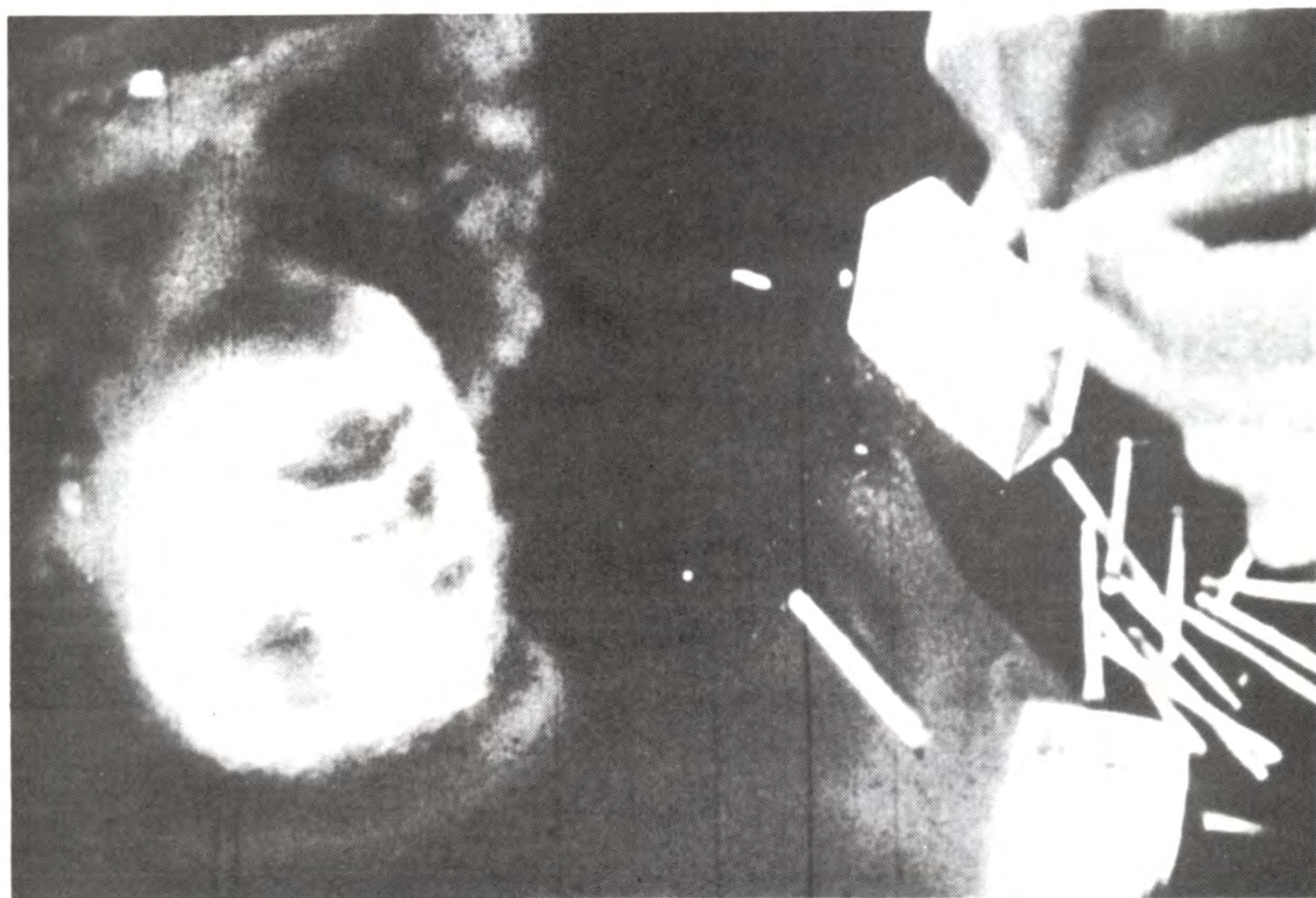
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**OPPOSITE:** Above—Embracing philosophy: Sugar joins the faculty. Below—Hostages and machineguns: Gary Cooper and Dan Duryea.











ard if energetic big-band affair, the second an improvised encore which Sugar herself orchestrates, moving downstage to a table, calling Gene Krupa down from his drum kit, asking an offscreen lightman for "a little juice," and assigning singing parts to various audience members while Krupa performs "Match Boogie" by drumming with matchsticks against a matchbox, a performance which concludes in a small burst of flame. Crucial here is the fact that through part of the number Sugar is seen *only* in reflection, against the table top. Bertram's orchestration of the library insurrection scene openly takes inspiration from Sugar's model, in that it too improvises a circle of bystanders into a chorus which accompanies and takes advantage of reflected light and a bursting flame.

The final aspect of Sugar's absent presence in the insurrection scene involves her status, not only as motive and model, but as the very source of light, of energy, which sets things into motion. Crucial here is an ongoing association in the film of Sugar with light and with windows. But one such window is more crucial than the others, the library skylight. During the first scene in the foundation library the housekeeper complains of fading carpets and open windows. Later in the film we observe various faculty members working on their dance steps, doing their best to recall Sugar's instructions from the night before. After Sugar stashes the incriminating newspapers in her bedroom, Professor Jerome implores her to give his colleagues another lesson. Before the lesson can begin, however, she needs to crank up the Victrola (the professors had been dancing to a polka, though she had been teaching them to conga) and she asks professor Quintana to open the skylight ("How about some light in here"). The gesture is emblematic of her general effect on the foundation—opening things up, renewing old energies, providing new knowledges—but it also sets the scene for the library insurrection in which "her" light, the light from a "Ball of Fire," a light associated with music and dance, with education and art, a light finally associated with the facts and conditions, with the faces and gestures and genres, of film itself, is the light which liberates knowledge for action in the world.

The claim that a Hollywood comedy can effect a form of liberation might well seem paradoxical or fantastic, especially when the specific form such liberation takes is that of remarriage or, in the case of *Ball of Fire*, of continuing academic appointment. The underlying moral of romance, for both Frye and Cavell, is that the reality against which such claims are measures and found wanting is always already fantastic. In epistemological terms this fantasy goes by the name of "skepticism," a desire for a world beyond human responsibilities and agreements. In aesthetic terms, this fantasy goes by the name of "realism," a desire to let the world speak for itself, a desire of which some have taken cinema to be the perfect realization. Neither fantasy can be dismissed out of hand; each has its own reality as a perspective human beings periodically adopt. Criticism, however, can rest content with neither, at least in the respect that the *task* of criticism, its fantasy, is exactly to accept responsibility for its objects, occasions, and descriptions, a responsibility which skepticism and realism alike forswear.

We might say that criticism is itself a form of remarriage, a relationship of interpretation and legibility or publication, making visible the self to another, thereby inviting the other's visibility in return. The Kantian term for this practice is "enlightenment." In *Ball of Fire* it's known as "illumination."

**OPPOSITE:** From "Drum Boogie" to "Match Boogie": Sugar as presiding spirit in the nightclub scene.

That Cavell sometimes calls it "philosophy" is one way of asserting that the value of particular art works depends, not on their generic affiliations, nor simply on their genetic circumstances, but upon the human meanings they bear witness to, on the readings they evoke, on the conversations they continue. There are moments in *A Natural Perspective* when Frye seems to advocate a non-critical response to literary works; comedy and romance in this view are matters of dramatic experience, not representational pointers to a world "behind" the players or the text. Cavell differs most clearly from Frye in taking aesthetic experience itself to be an intricate and edgeless fabric of conversational or dialogic implications, grammatical entailments of what Wittgenstein would call a "form of life." But for both Frye and Cavell ultimate value resides finally in the words we take home with us, the words we come home to, as to a marriage. In *The Myth of Deliverance* Frye describes this as the "final reversal" by which the play's directional energy shifts outward, into the minds of the audience, resulting in "a last recognition, the incorporation of the play into our own creative lives and traditions" (89). Only by taking our own experiences seriously, I take Frye and Cavell to be dreaming together, can we hope to awake "what is dead or sleeping within us, like Hermione stirring within Julio Romano's statue and responding to Paulina's challenge of 'Be stone no more'" (90).

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## Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan by Robin Wood

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by Bryan Bruce & Gloria Berlin

THE CRITICAL RE-EVALUATION OF A FILM either overlooked or dismissed at the time of its release often involves the identification of this rediscovered work as a masterpiece, with the critic who is its champion sharing in the cult of prestige which may subsequently accumulate around it. Aside from the objectionably masculine-authoritarian significance of the etymology of 'masterpiece,' promoting an ideal of control and craft in the production of art, the practice of setting up hierarchies in any artistic field can only lead to the unnecessary privileging of certain aesthetic forms or 'tastes' over others, and the pointless argumentation over which work deserves to be enshrined as the most supreme achievement of genre, auteur, or decade. The alternative is a re-evaluation of not only the film itself, but also of both the function of criticism in relation to it, which, ideally, should always be questioned and amended, and of its relation to the historical period from which it emerged, the critic, with the benefit of hindsight, having access to various contexts previously unavailable. It is here that the selection of the films to be reconsidered becomes crucial: it should be those works which are relevant to current ideological situations, and which, in drawing attention to them and the issues they raise, define one aspect of political intervention.

*Corrupt*,<sup>1</sup> then, a movie certainly not deemed a masterpiece by any critics at the time of its release in the early '80s, is to be looked at for the current issues it raises—the use of rock music icons in mainstream film, the borrowing of punk 'strategy' as a contemporary expression of the rebellion of youth culture—and the degree of its success in relaying this 'history,' not necessarily by making sense of it, but rather in serving to redirect the assault toward popular audiences.

*Corrupt*'s specific punk attitude is attributable for the most part to the presence of John Lydon, aka Johnny Rotten, ex-Sex Pistol and current PiL strategist, in his 'dramatic screen debut,' so much so that the film becomes partly about Rotten and the kind of corruption the Sex Pistols self-

# Corrupt/ Cop Killer/ Order of Death



Elvis Presley in **Jailhouse Rock**.



Paul Jones in **Privilege**.



consciously exploited. Considering Lydon's current take on the media with PiL,<sup>2</sup> he is the ideal choice for a film that critiques American culture and institutionalized authority, appropriately directed by a Marxist professor of media manipulation from the University of Milan, Roberto Faenza.

In order to approach Rotten's punk stance, and to put *Corrupt* in some kind of recognizable context, a brief look at the cinematic expression of youth rebellion is relevant for its use of music 'stars' and its articulation of the meaning of their personas already developed through the pop music industry. *Corrupt* is one of five films, beginning with *Jailhouse Rock* (Richard Thorpe, 1957) starring Elvis Presley, and extending through *Privilege* (Peter Watkins, 1967) with Paul Jones, *Performance* (Nicholas Roeg, 1970) with Mick Jagger, and *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (Nicholas Roeg, 1976) with David Bowie, in which the process of the assimilation of a generation's 'rebel' instinct can be traced through the role of its hero.<sup>3</sup> Each film, within the context of the era during which it was made, reflects the necessary amount of co-option exerted by society to contain the 'outsider,' determining the permissible degree to which this figure can become a disruptive influence. The pop icon is the connection, a role that trades on non-conformity, the outlaw stance, with each film presenting its rebel as a character complementary to the real-life pop star persona. Appealing to disaffected 'teen-age' youth, the films raised their believability quotient by using counter-culture stars (rather than actors, method or otherwise) in vehicles designed to use their pre-existing image to capture a chunk of the 'teen market.'

*Jailhouse Rock* casts Elvis, in his first movie, as a man convicted unjustly who through his singing talents works his way back into society, although finding its rewards shallow. The film hinges on Elvis' performance of the title song, an eloquent ode to prison riots, full of gay innuendo with dancers dress as cons cavorting up and down cell block 9. As the most succinct representation of Elvis' threat—a call for rioting, prison break-out, and disregard for sexual norms—it must be tempered by the knowledge that this number is performed by Elvis as part of a televised jailhouse variety show, and is, as such, his bid for fame, success, and the straight life

to come. Operating on two levels, the film parallels the general co-option of Elvis by making possible, itself, his integration into mass culture. During the process of his transition from convict to star in the film, Presley remains the alienated 'other,' unhappy and distant from human contact, including his former exploitative cell-mate and his well-meaning manager. In his own career, Elvis transcended his juvenile stance of the '50s, paving the way for the Vegas performer of the '60s and '70s, locked away in Graceland, only to be revealed as the lonely, suffering star, the distanced martyr in the service of the public.

By 1968, when *Privilege* was released, the image of the rebel had changed sufficiently to allow the hero, Steve Shorter/Paul Jones, to voice his discontent coherently. As a rock star, Steve Shorter causes riots in his teen audiences with the song "Set Me Free," a little number that has him beaten by British bobbies and thrown in a cage. His manager sees dollar signs when a religious movement promises backing in exchange for Steve's 'image,' and he soon becomes the first rock'n'roll preacher, world famous, a veritable messiah. Steve abandons everything when confronted with the truth of his self-betrayal, occasioned by his meeting with an artist (superstar model Jean Shrimpton) who values his integrity more than his money. The last shot of the film is a discarded Steve Shorter commercial, accompanied by voice-over, marvelling at the changing fads of youth.

Critics hated *Privilege* on its release, accusing it of cynicism and negativity. For its ruthless critique of rock'n'roll and the media, both in the service of a big money industry that employs a facade of rebelliousness as a front for an oppressive and exploitive ideology, *Privilege* gained little support. However, by effectively transferring the image of the pop music star onto the screen, this particular style of icon in films after *Privilege* would clearly align itself with a 'radical' critique of society.

*Performance* begins exactly where *Privilege* left off. The scenario of a retired pop star living as a recluse allows the film to deal with the notions of androgyny and masculine role-playing as it pertains to power, with Mick Jagger as the effeminate teen idol housing a wanted gangster (Edward



Mick Jagger in **Performance**.



David Bowie in **The Man Who Fell To Earth**.



Fox) in his mansion, until the two trade identities and one escapes the self-imposed prison of the lavish house ('Graceland'). The widespread counter-culture of the '60s could easily accommodate Jagger's bisexual posturing in lieu of his reputation as a "ladies' man"; the only people shocked where the Sunday paper film reviewers. From this point on, the ambivalent sexuality of the pop music icon was as much a part of the radical stance as alienation from culture, and is a notable part of both post-'60s films, *The Man Who Fell To Earth* and *Corrupt*. *Performance* was easily assimilated back into societal norms through its status as a cult film, its self-absorbed, morbid, druggy atmosphere allowing it to remain little more than a decadent view of the lives of the rich rather than an impetus for change or a real critique of socially imposed rules.

*The Man Who Fell To Earth* is similarly problematic in its use of a hero so far removed from real life that any explicit threat in his criticism of society is negated. David Bowie as Valentine Smith, an alien from outer space, is a reprise of the persona he created for himself as a rock idol. In this consistent role, Bowie has an androgynous appeal, a feature of the male stars in all five vehicles; however, only *Corrupt* ventures a formulated attack on sex-role stereotyping and repression. Both *The Man Who Fell To Earth* and *Corrupt* (as well as *Privilege*) are concerned with the effects of mass media, specifically television, on cultural determination, and the disintegration of the 'hero.' *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, following the prototype, deals with the consequences of the alienation of the hero by employing the tragic end. The visible consequence is to present rebellion against society as a dead end, one doomed to failure, or to succeed only at the expense of the rebel hero. In *Corrupt*, John Lydon as the hero is the first successful screen rebel of this type, breaking the previous pattern, and bringing to full fruition society's worst nightmare.

*Corrupt* is the penultimate expression of the subversive rock icon; that the icon in question is Lydon, the most infamous 'punk,' is partly responsible, punk being the most fully realized and consciously political (if still highly problematic) embodiment of youth culture to date. Ironically the lexicon it developed was more cogent than others because it refused to have itself defined. If *Corrupt* seems at first confused and disjointed, it is less a measure of its failure to articulate than an approximation of this punk stance, a particular strategy of disruption that refuses to make the obvious connections for the audience.

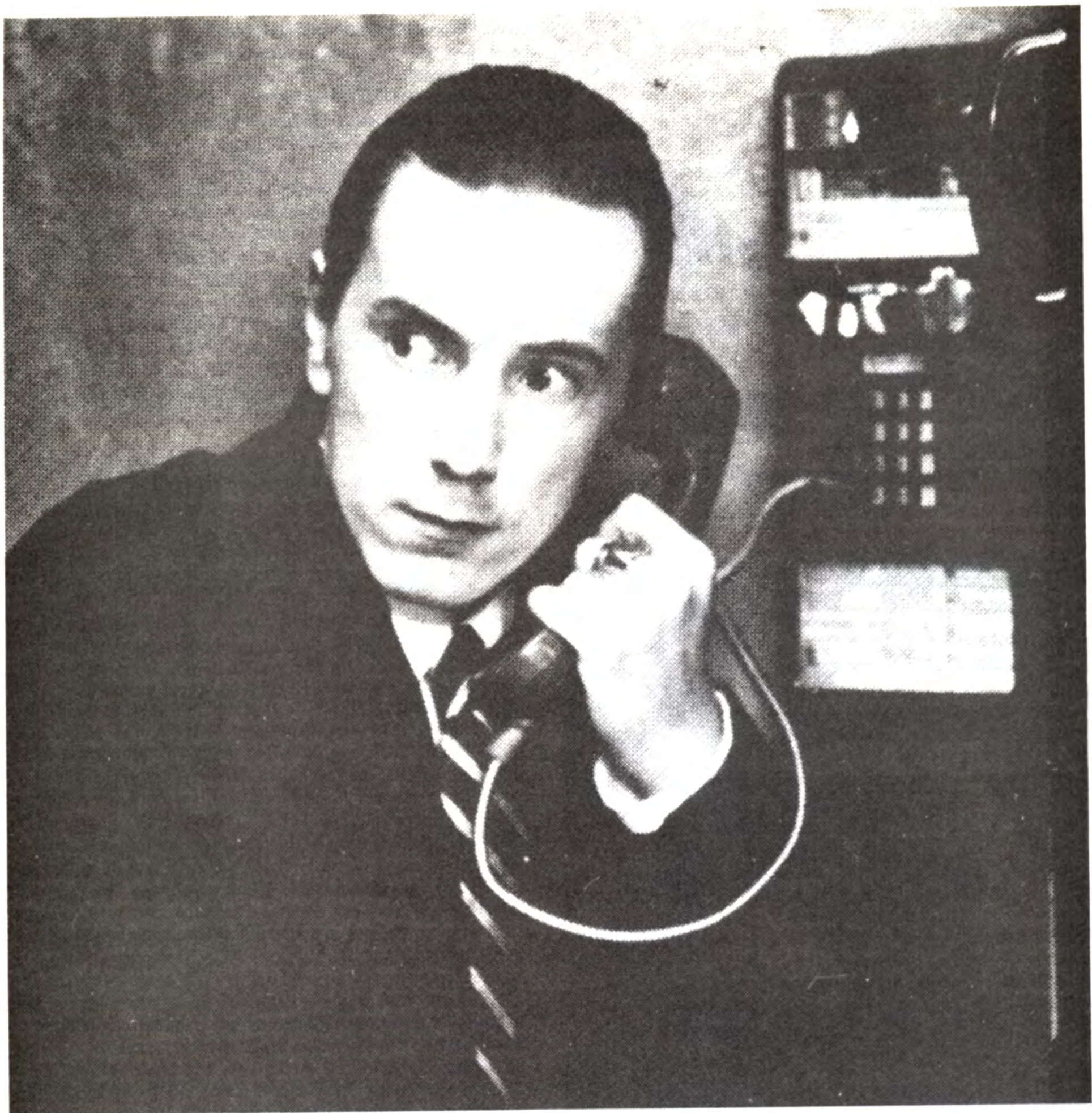
Johnny Rotten began his reinvention of the 'rock star' image with the Sex Pistols, a band that set out to destroy every preconception of what rock'n'roll was supposed to be about. As the brainchild of Malcolm McLaren, the Pistols were originally designed as a means to using fashion and music as a spontaneous expression of anarchistic rebellion, consciously snubbing more intellectually approved channels. But by exploiting the music industry for all its worth, the band became much more political than this; as Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons put it, "Their fury made them innovators; for the first time a band was directly reacting to the music business monolith . . ."<sup>4</sup> Rotten transformed the concept 'rock band' into an assault on the media machine and the audience which mindlessly supports it. Again quoting music critics Burchill/Parsons, "Rock had always flirted with violence as mere metaphor; Rotten destroyed the pose and replaced it with reality—constantly haranguing the audience with streams of abuse, spitting and snarling lyrics as though they tasted of his own piles, dancing like a rotten corpse . . . glass eyes burning, pallid flesh decorated with self-inflicted

fag burns, amphetamine-parched lips turned back in savage contempt . . ."<sup>5</sup> Rotten's incorporation of sadistic and masochistic stratagems as a comment on the traditional relationship between performer and spectator is superimposed in *Corrupt* onto the master/slave relationship between a psychotic young rich kid and a brutal police officer as a metaphor for the corruption induced by a repressive capitalist system. The strength of Lydon's playful and completely self-referential performance allows him to articulate more fully the Johnny Rotten persona; as Lydon said of the film, "It gave me a chance to say what I'd wanted to for a long time."<sup>6</sup>

*Corrupt* concerns a cop-killer whom we see in disguise as a policeman committing murder in the opening images, and again after we have been introduced to the two main characters, Leo Smith/John Lydon and Fred O'Connor/Harvey Keitel. The two figures are paralleled and inverted throughout; we do not discover that Leo is the real killer until near the end of the film. Leo and O'Connor represent two sides of American capitalism, the former a spoiled rich kid who is guilty about his inherited wealth, the latter a cop who abuses his position of power (extortion, bribery) in order to afford a rich and affluent lifestyle. O'Connor's large, expensive, sparsely furnished (read minimalist, post-modern) apartment, overlooking the Manhattan skyline, reflects the emptiness of his life, underlined by having him seated in a cold, black leather chair, alone, smoking a cigar, and listening to the same banal little country and western ditty ("Tchaichovsky's Destruction," written by "Steve") that plays continually throughout the film. The actions of the two characters are intercut before their actual meeting, setting them up as images of one another, as two sides of corruption. O'Connor is shown in his apartment, and at the police station being assailed by a female journalist trying to get him to admit to corruption in the NYPD, Leo in his bedroom making a video journal describing his plan to follow O'Connor to get him to confess to the cop-murders. O'Connor says that it is journalists, not cops, who are a threat to order; Leo sarcastically notes that there is "something almost paternal" about O'Connor, pinpointing the pseudo-father pose of the police. Leo, in red sunglasses, blue hat, and Team USA sports jersey, begins his surveillance of Lieutenant O'Connor, inverting the conventional cop/criminal roles. Their identities are linked explicitly when Leo, upon finally showing up at O'Connor's apartment, introduces himself as "Fred. Like you." He points to the cop-killer newspaper headline in his hand, letting the sensationalized media message speak for him, qualifying it only by saying, "Maybe it wasn't me. Maybe it was the other part of me," a reference to O'Connor, and to the kind of schizophrenia induced by the internalization of a grossly over-stated authority. Leo's theory, borrowed from the female journalist, Lenore, who is married to Bob, O'Connor's ex-roommate, perhaps ex-lover, and partner in corruption, is that the purpose of the police is to create a condition of disorder in order to generate circumstances under which we can be punished according to the desire in us produced by this system, or, in other words, that the police, as an instance of institutionalized authority, implicitly promote crime in order to ensure the perpetuation of their empowered position. In the film the media becomes the conductor of this formula, the marriage of the dishonest cop to the seemingly radical journalist representing the alignment of two corrupt, symbiotic authority complexes.

The relationship of the cop and the cop-killer also becomes a kind of perverse marriage, Leo moving into O'Connor's apartment first in the capacity of captive, masochistic slave, gradually evolving into the nagging suburban housewife. The





John Lydon in **Corrupt**.

subtle exchange of roles and shifts in power are played out between cop and criminal, as in Nicholas Roeg's *Bad Timing*,<sup>7</sup> to the effect of blurring the distinction between the two, and severely undermining the ethical posturing of the law enforcer. In *Corrupt*, Leo starts out in the active role of voyeur and pursuer, while O'Connor is shown most often sitting passively in his apartment. Leo then becomes the passive, masochistic toilet slave, with O'Connor actively degrading and battering him and spying on him voyeuristically through the bathroom keyhole. By the end of the film, Leo has become active once more, manufacturing his previous role as toilet slave by tying himself up in the bathtub in order to incriminate O'Connor, who, having become helpless and powerless, has no choice but to kill himself.

As part of the 'punk' strategy of *Corrupt*, these fragmented and unstable characters are presented within a plot which is,

itself, disjointed and difficult to follow. Pieces of the narrative information we receive are heard incidentally, 'wild-sound' from media sources constantly in the background, as in Fassbinder's film about terrorists, *The Third Generation*. The opening images of Leo making a video journal, the car radio, the television that Leo makes O'Connor purchase to allay his boredom: these media run as leitmotifs across the film. When Bob and Lenore move to the country, we hear on their car radio, as if by accident, Leo Smith's background, that he has been in the news all his life for confessing to crimes he never committed, that he lives with his rich grandmother, Marguerite Archer/Sylvia Sydney, and that he has constructed a myth around himself to the extent that he cannot distinguish between fiction and reality. When O'Connor visits the grandmother, we discover that Leo's parents were killed in a car accident, and he confesses to crimes to atone for the sin of





Harvey Keitel and John Lydon in **Corrupt**.

inheriting blood money. His psychosis is attributed directly to the controlling hegemonies of wealth and media. "I told you he was a silly boy," says Sydney, "he'll probably be president some day," the presence of her persona serving as a reference to classical Hollywood and the lineage of media myth-making perfected in the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

The promulgation of false information and the inability to decipher the narrative reality follow from this sequence on so many levels that we begin to feel disoriented. Bob breaks into O'Connor's apartment to find Leo tied up in the bathroom, and when he tells him he can't keep people like animals, O'Connor knocks him unconscious. He then takes him to a remote location and force's Leo at gun-point to slit Bob's throat as a condition for gaining his freedom. O'Connor does not think Leo is the cop-killer at this point; Leo does not realize that there are no bullets in the gun. Nothing is what it seems. As Leo goes free, it appears that the cop is the killer, and that he has corrupted another innocent victim by framing Leo for his crime.

When Leo returns to O'Connor's apartment soon after, claiming that he thought someone recognized him, the relationship between the two men begins to shift once more, and it is here that the Johnny Rotten persona begins to assert itself most succinctly. Lydon's performance now acknowledges an understanding of the position of those who are marginalized and oppressed by the patriarchal-authoritarian order by emerging himself in this 'role' within his part as Leo. To extract the revenge he seeks, Leo enters O'Connor's life playing the victim, the slave, the captive. O'Connor's position as a policeman has conditioned him to accept Leo's role, and that of others like him, as a reality, one that he can use and abuse to his own satisfaction. That Leo represents both male and female roles of subservience to authority (policeman or husband) makes the alternative point that authoritarian sadism extends through private, sexual practice to the cultural sphere and back again.<sup>8</sup> The film quite clearly posits Leo as a representation of the female position in particular as their relationship alters from one viewed merely as sexualized, sado-masochistic role-playing to that of the domestic marriage in which Leo becomes the wife remaining at home (still captive, but not in a strictly sexual sense) while O'Connor goes to work. At this point Leo introduces into this 'arrangement' the traditional bartering of man-wife relations. This means that he will begin his ceaseless nagging and whining and snide snivelling, attributes that are a highlight of the Rotten/Lydon persona. In its extravagance, this cyclone of sarcasm is rendered as the very black humour of Leo/Lydon, encompassing as well his stage act as Rotten, realizing to full potential the significance of his punk identity. In the morning in a bathrobe Johnny Rotten makes coffee for an off-duty cop clad only in a towel, and nags, "Shouldn't you be going to the office?" The image of the 'punk' (the word, in its original sense as a part of jail argot, referring to the 'kid' forced into the passive homosexual position) masquerading as a housewife is both funny and chilling, allowing Lydon to express brutally all the contradictions built into American capitalism exposed by the film.

At this point O'Connor visits Lenore, who raises the suspicion that he and Bob had been secret lovers. The master/slave relationship between Leo and O'Connor now takes on an even more explicitly sexual significance, suggesting that O'Connor's need to punish is a direct result of repressing his homosexuality. Leo recognizes this, and begins to exploit O'Connor's masochism, the reverse side of his machismo, saying, "I can see it in your face—you need to confess," and later, "the first time I saw you I knew you'd confess for me." Leo rushes around to set up the incriminating evidence to



frame O'Connor, actively playing the corrupt cop role once more, while O'Connor becomes increasingly confused, passive, and impotent. Leo reveals that he really is the cop-killer, and convinces O'Connor to sacrifice himself to save Leo, the most extreme gesture of subservience. In the final inversion, the criminal has become the complete master, the cop slits his own throat, and we are left with Leo/Lydon's face reflected in the window, superimposed over New York City. Unlike the other films that present rock idols as rebels, which work, ultimately, to dismantle the threat built in to their personas, *Corrupt* allows Johnny Rotten to emerge, as he did from the Sex Pistols, with his grotesque, intimidating leer, and his rebellious angst, intact. And in opposition to the merely sexually ambivalent stars of the previous films who end in exile or an irretrievable fall, Lydon, in his first feature film, plays intelligently on the inversion of sexual roles, and is left smiling with yellow teeth over America. □

## ENDNOTES

1. Also known as *Copkiller* and *Order of Death*, depending on where it was released, the film is based on the novel *The Order of Death* by Hugh Fleetwood.
2. With PiL, Lydon has continued his project of exposing the limitations and hypocrisy of the music business and its media. He is consistently rude and aggressive towards interviewers, refusing to define himself or his position with the 'band,' eschewing the expected protocol that oils the publicity machine. "There should be no difference between who's on stage and who's in the audience," Lydon offered in an appearance on Tom Snyder's *Tomorrow* show, which threatened, at times, to turn into an all-out brawl, "and we've tried very hard to break down those barriers, but it's not working, so we have to think again . . ." Lydon angered Snyder by insisting that PiL was a company, not a band, in which his strategy of assault and subterfuge was more important than their musical instruments. "The Sex Pistols was going to be the absolute end of rock'n'roll," continued Lydon, "which I thought it was. Unfortunately, the majority of the public, being the senile animals that they are, got that wrong . . ." Certainly Lydon's latest project with PiL—an album called *album*, a single called *single*, a compact disc called *compact disc*, etc.—extends his attempt to bring to the attention of the public the hidden, controlling mechanics of the music industry.
3. The transition to the screen of the male rock rebel was made easier by reference to previous film rebels, particularly Montgomery Clift and James Dean, heroes not completely identified with the traditional masculine role, attempting to find meaning in a post-nuclear era. No such reference exists for the female music star, resulting in a less formulated, more problematic screen image, each conforming to dominant notions of the cinematic representation of women. This includes Blondie's Deborah Harry in *Union City* as the wife whose liberation consists of realigning herself with a different type of man and dying her hair blond to increase her attractiveness and status value to him, and, in *Videodrome*, as the sexually vampiristic female (vagina dentata). Similarly, Madonna in *Desperately Seeking Susan* is the adventuress-slut whose persona promises liberation, but is too compromised to achieve anything, and, more obviously, The Bangles' Susanna Hoff, the cute and cuddly Annette Funicello girlfriend in *Allnighter*. Only Cherie Currie (Runaways) in *Foxes*, although still in the traditional victim position (as the battered daughter of a police officer), is allowed to articulate the sense of directionless desperation the powerless are left with. The five films mentioned acknowledge the privileged position the male characters start from in the attempt to gain control of their lives. The female pop icon begins in a powerless state; it is only the activity of men that determines her life. If *Foxes* had been centred around Currie's role, it would have been contained neatly within a genre. But as a vehicle for Jodie Foster, as the self-determined character who rises above the male-engendered circumstances that ruin her girlfriends' lives, the film remains exceptional. As with Lydon in *Corrupt*, it is the ability of these powerless characters to operate outside the sphere of influence of male power structures that has made these two films difficult for critics and audiences seeking easier solutions.

4. Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny*, London, Pluto Press, 1978, p. 34.
5. *Loc. cit.*
6. *NY Rocker*, no. 50, March, 1984, p. 32.
7. Harvey Keitel's part in *Corrupt* is almost a direct reprisal of his cop role in *Bad Timing*, as if the latter character finally allowed the identity of the criminal (played by Art Garfunkel) to take over his own. The use of Garfunkel by Roeg is also interesting in that he plays it in the opposite direction of the rebel persona. Garfunkel's 'rock' image was of the gentle, despondent, sweet-voiced boy (translated approximately in tact in *Catch-22*); Roeg purposely casts him in *Bad Timing* as the self-centred, sexually violent creep for disruptive effect.
8. Two films that have come out in the past year take up, from very different perspectives, the male homosexual master/slave relationship. The central love relationship in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, between a young Pakistani boy and an ex-skinhead (and ex-member of the fascistic National Front), engages the sado-masochistic power struggles between and within class, race and sex. Friends from childhood, the two boys meet years later, Johnny/Daniel Day Lewis now a reformed skinhead/fascist, and Omar/Gordon Warneke at the point of rejecting his father's socialist ideals and embracing his uncle's rampantly capitalistic ones. As the two become unlikely lovers, Johnny, who as a sadistic, 'Paki-bashing' skin, had just previously been in the position of power, gradually and subtly takes on the masochistic role, allowing Omar, the emerging capitalist, to exploit him as cheap labour. Johnny's new-found masochism, which has resulted from the guilt he feels over his fascistic behaviour, demonstrates the potential we have to exhibit apparently contradictory impulses (Freud's ideal of component instincts). The relationship between the two boys takes on a political dimension; Omar's capitalistic fervour enslaves Johnny, drawing a parallel between his capitalism and Johnny's former fascism. As in *Corrupt*, the extremity and vehemence of the fascistic, authoritarian position (the police in *Corrupt*, the skinheads in *My Beautiful Laundrette*) conceals the repression of the opposite impulse, the desire to be punished. The difference in the two examples lies in the separation of private and public spheres. *Corrupt* explores the sado-masochism of a private, implicitly sexual relationship as a symptom and symbol of authority and corruption in the public sphere; *My Beautiful Laundrette* separates the private, sexual relationship of the two boys, which seems to be completely egalitarian and free of any sado-masochism, from their public relationship, which appears to be based on the exploitation of one race or one class by another.

*The Hitcher*, like *Corrupt*, deals with an unacknowledged, implicit homosexual relationship between the authoritarian father figure (Rutger Hauer), the psychopathic, homicidal hitcher, and the innocent, helpless victim (C. Thomas Howell). Hauer plays the stereotypical homosexual psycho whose presence in Hollywood films reads as an expression of dominant homophobia and the repression of the homosexual potential in everyone, with Howell as the average guy with whom we are encouraged to identify fighting the return of the repressed. Interestingly, the hitcher, as the sadist, terrorizes his victim/slave by implicating him in the murders that he randomly commits, putting him in the position of a criminal persecuted by the police (just as in *Corrupt*, Smith implicates his victims in his crimes). Again, as in the other two films, there is a subtle inversion of the sadist and masochist roles, here the hitcher eventually encouraging the victim to annihilate him. The scene at the roadside cafe in which the hitcher allows the boy to shoot him under the table with an empty gun is the first instance of the reversal, and the orgasmic frenzy exhibited by the boy, his hands pumping the gun at his crotch, gives the sadistic gesture an unavoidably sexual significance. The film progresses to the complete reversal of roles, which the hitcher bound and made passive by the authorities, and the boy contemptuously spitting in his face. Again, the relationship becomes sexual as the hitcher provocatively licks up the boy's spittle. At the end, the boy finally thinks he has killed off the monster, pushed the repressed back under, and, disturbingly, carresses the hitcher's hair with his rifle before he returns to life to make his final assault. Although the film seems relatively unconscious of its sexual project, it nevertheless exhibits the capacity of human sexuality to encompass the most extreme contradictory drives and the dangerous extent to which repression induced by rigid authority can unleash violent and psychotic impulses.



# letters

## Responses to "Leavis, Marxism, and Film Culture" in *CineAction!* #8

Dear Robin,

I very much enjoyed your piece on Leavis, and feel largely in agreement with the concerns and attitudes you express. ("Yes, but . . ."). I find it strange, however, that you find the realm which you term 'semiotics/structuralism' to be entirely antagonistic to these attitudes, rather than a potential ally. I suspect that what you have in mind are the multiplicity of works produced from within the academic establishment whose surface radicalism disguises their deep complicity

in the lamentable educational structure which you accurately analyse. The people who write these texts have no genuine interest in a radical change in society, which would disturb their extremely comfortable lives. Among more serious contributions to the field, however, it is doubtful if 'semiotics' as a science ever really came into existence—it was, rather, a potentiality for which a number of remarkable prolegomena were written, while the task of actually establishing it was never fully pursued. Equally, it is difficult to think of any major thinker (with the exception of Claude Lévi-Strauss) who could be adequately described as a 'structuralist.'

You relate this area of thought to "the contemporary wasteland of 'deconstruction'." Yet the term 'deconstruction' is principally associated with (and was, I think, introduced by) Jacques Derrida. One of the first topics which he subjected to 'deconstruction' (in the opening essay of 'Writing and Difference') was structuralism itself! If structuralism is the attempt to throw a net over the recalcitrant object, to capture and codify it, Derrida's con-

cerns were with the inevitable gaps between the lines of that net, the 'holes' out of which the net is formed (without which it would not be a net). These gaps, these holes, constitute *différance*, irreducible to any structure. Deconstruction, far from being 'scientific,' would be compelled to question the grounds on which the polarity scientific/non-scientific could be raised. It is precisely such hierarchical polarities which would be reversed, and then transgressed, in this project.

Derrida, of course, is a philosopher, not a critic, and his influence so far on film theory has been negligible (apart from the writings of Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier). More troublesome, it seems to me, is your relegation of Roland Barthes to the area of mere 'theoretical exploration.' It is surely impossible to accuse a writer of scientific aridity when his last works were concerned, in the most personal manner imaginable, with the pain of love ('Fragments of a Lover's Discourse') and the confrontation with death ('La Chambre Claire').

Indeed, Barthes has, for me, something of the status that Leavis



has for you. The rigour of his fundamental ethical commitment (essentially, an opposition to all forms of power) informs every aspect of his work, down to the grammar of his writing style (with its continuous attempt to avoid the declarative). His remarks on the potentiality of the seminar group as a utopia of human community are directly parallel to Leavis' consciousness of the possible role of the university. And many of his comments (particularly in later years) on his own situation as 'teacher' have a quality of nobility, rare in the modern world, but appropriate for a man who, beginning as a classical scholar and becoming an interpreter of Nietzsche, was always resolutely untimely.

This view of Barthes' importance is informed more by his later work (roughly, from 'The Pleasure of the Text' onwards) than the earlier phase, but the intelligence, seriousness of intent, wit, and gentleness are present throughout. Even when he sought most urgently to do so, he never managed to exclude evaluative categorization as an internal part of his enterprise (work/text; readerly/writerly; plaisir/jouissance). And the 'scientific' enterprise of 'S/Z' roused him to a gleeful weaving of humorous self-mockery into its very structure.

The death of Barthes, which hit me as a personal loss, remains troubling in its implication of the impossibility of an acute sensibility surviving in the modern world.

—Peter Benson  
London, England

Dear Robin Wood,

I am always impressed and often persuaded by your film reviews in *CineAction!* and your comments on *Blue Velvet* in the article "Leavis, Marxism and Film Culture" served as a much awaited rejoinder to the empty praise of popular opinion. However, I found much to disagree with in the first half of the article. Positing individual fulfilment for all as the "ultimate aim," you claim

that capitalism has perverted this concept by perceiving fulfilment in terms of money, power, status and 'success.' You go on to say that the values of capitalism must be "strenuously opposed and countered" in order that 'human nature' can be liberated and fulfilment attained. While I do not wish to claim that capitalism is a good or bad thing I do want to argue that your Leavisian sentiments undermine your vision of the "ultimate aim" and that the essentials of human nature which you value so highly are not contradicted by the values of capitalism. Life is a struggle for all organisms and for most, if not all humans. Life is a struggle against the environment, against disease, between organisms and between members of the same species. It is only within the context of a struggle that fulfilment can be achieved; if there were no struggle there would be no concept of fulfilment because there would be no concept of unfulfilment. Lack of fulfilment characterizes the human condition and it is this lack that inspires criticism, change, practice, revaluation, etc. Furthermore, this lack is not shared equally by all humans in each area of human achievement and you recognize this point when you echo Leavis and compare academic competition with sporting competition. The world of sport most clearly demonstrates the unavoidable element of competition permeating human relationships. The concepts of power and domination necessarily structure sport and in your analogy you reveal the extension of this structure into other areas of human activity. Struggle implies difference and difference in a competitive world leads to power relations and inevitably domination. How can you suggest that "a university English Literature programme should not be automatically accessible to anyone who wishes to enter it" and then look forward to a world in which fulfilment is not realised through competition? The Leavisian concepts of "seriousness," "intelligence" and "significance" and his "key words" such as "values" and "standards" only have meaning in a world of competition, power rela-

tionships and domination. Just as the student with a high standard of intelligence will succeed in the academic world, so will the businessman with a high standard of management skill succeed in the business world. The same competition that limits entry to university programmes limits individual sporting success and individual standard of living.

In your reference to three essentials of human nature you mention the ability and desire to communicate; the need to give and receive love and tenderness; and the drive for fulfilment and self-respect. The article represents these three features of human nature as essentially good, natural qualities which must be liberated. There is nothing essentially good about communication and certainly no such thing as "liberated" communication. Communicative ability varies and can be measured on the same scale as the Leavisian concepts of "seriousness" and "intelligence." Rhetorical style, tone of speech, command of facts, humour, poetry, etc. are all communication weapons as well as tools. Language and other forms of communication are arenas for competition and power struggle as well as for cooperation. The origins of this dual nature of communication do not lie in capitalism, private ownership or the subordination of women, but in man's biological duality: his individuality and his membership of the species. We communicate for the same reasons that we favour love and tenderness. In a world of individual struggle interaction will either take the form of absolute competition or individuals will enter into alliances and form bonds. Love, friendship and communication are strategies employed by the individual in order to enhance its capacity for success, its personal fulfilment, its power. In our world of complex social interaction and eclectic intelligence it is difficult to see emotions as individual strategies of power but to deny this is to claim the existence of Platonic essences such as love, hate, tenderness, etc. which we humans have "always" possessed. To talk about communication, love and tender-



ness as strategies is not to say that they are necessarily insidious. It is because they are successful for the species. The words 'power,' 'strategy,' 'personal success,' etc. are often considered to be in conflict with words such as 'love,' 'caring,' 'friendship,' etc. but this is itself a strategy of communication: as long as we believe that love, caring and friendship are somehow natural, good and essentially human we will continue to value them and they will continue to serve the individuals and the societies that employ them.

I am unhappy with your article therefore because I do not think you can reconcile a belief in Leavisian relative concepts such as "seriousness," "intelligence," and "stand-

ards" with a desire to create a world without power and domination relationships. How can we exclude people from sports teams and academic programmes and yet have a world in which fulfilment is attained without competition? No doubt I have revealed my Darwinian sympathies by now. Life is a struggle for survival marked by competition but it is that same struggle and competition which has produced our creative and constructive civilization.

Once again I would like to thank you for your interesting and refreshing articles and for prompting me to write down a few of my own views.

Yours sincerely,  
**Paul Downes**  
Newmarket, Ontario

## Robin Wood replies

I read Peter Benson's letter with great sympathy. I hope he is right in believing that Leavisian principles are not incompatible with the finer developments within the semiotics/structuralism movement. My own work has sought to move tentatively towards some form of synthesis, even if it has not yet reached one very convincingly. (This will I think be clear if one juxtaposes my piece on Leavis in *CineAction!* No. 8 with my explicitly Barthesian analysis of *I Walked with a Zombie* in No. 3/4.) I remain troubled by the apparent failure of the political impetus. The later Barthes writings cannot perhaps be accused of 'scientific' aridity, but they do seem to register a partial withdrawal from direct political engagement into a more private and personal arena.

I am much less in sympathy with Paul Downes' position, which seems to be rooted in a notion of simple continuity and parallel between humanity and other animal species that I find untenable. The human race is set apart by the evolution of consciousness, which brings with it the potential for decision, responsibility and change: human beings can decide what kind of society they wish to live in and then construct that society. Human life is *not* doomed to be 'a struggle for survival marked by competi-

tion.' While Mr. Downes does 'not wish to claim that capitalism is a good or bad thing,' his letter reads suspiciously like an apologia for it and a 'naturalization' of it as the inevitable form of society. The letter also seems to rest upon some confusion between social inequality and personal inequality. No one, I take it, claims that everyone is, could or should be equal in every way on an individual level—equally intelligent, equally sensitive, equally good at chess, equally fond of spaghetti, equally straight, equally gay, equally tall or equally fat. What Marxism, feminism and gay activism claim is that inequality should not be built into the very structures and ideology of culture. There is a great deal of difference between suggesting that entrance into (say) a university film study course might be dependent upon the student's aptitude for and serious interest in the subject, and defending a society in which one's prospects are determined by one's wealth, class, gender, colour, and sexual orientation. It seems today vital that qualities of 'seriousness' and 'intelligence' (with the full weight Leavis gives to such terms) be devoted to the task of constructing a civilisation based upon cooperation, social equality and toleration.

—Robin Wood

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Colin Campbell and Lisa Steele in **Shango Botanico**.



## Contributors

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PAUL DELLA PENNA, like Borges, will be a librarian. He is on the executive of the Innis Film Society.

MARC GLASSMAN and JUDY WOLFE work at Pages bookshop on Queen St., which Marc founded in 1979. They were among the principal organizers of the 1984 Forbidden Films Festival. Their most recent collaboration, *Rachael*, is now over five weeks old and is presently residing with her parents.

KATHLEEN MAITLAND-CARTER is an artist and film-maker living in Toronto.

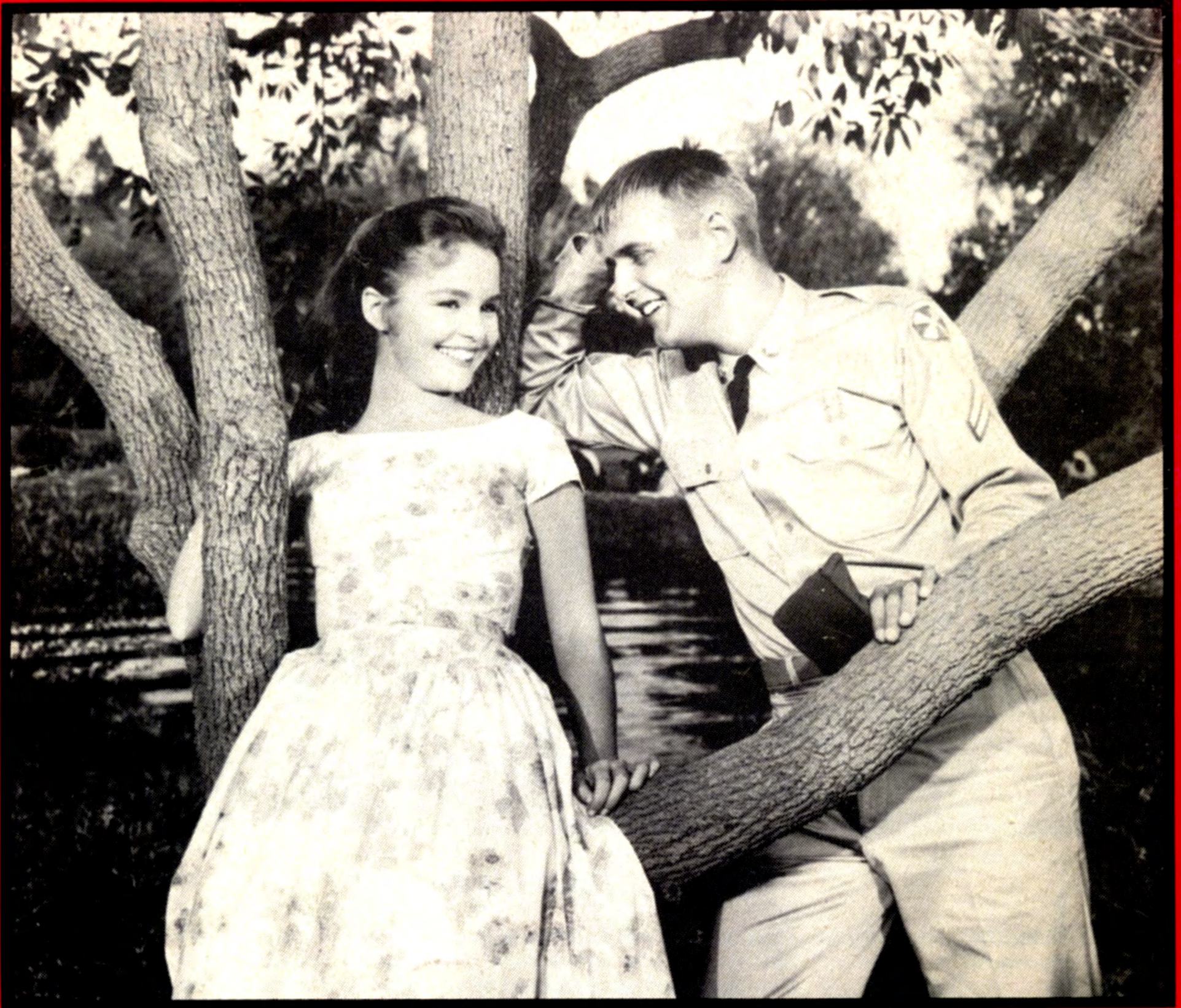
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Colin Campbell interviewed  
Pee Wee Herman, Johnny Rotten,  
and films by McCarey, Ford, Greenaway,  
Von Praunheim, Ealing Studios, Hawks